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THE

STORY OF THE PSALMS

BY

HENRY VAN DYKE, D. D.

SEVENTH EDITION

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To

MY FATHER,

WHO WAS MY FIRST TEACHER,

AND IS MY FAITHFUL FRIEND,

This Book is Dedicated

IN GRATEFUL AFFECTION.

N10726

PREFACE

THERE is nothing truly great or lasting in literature which is not, in the broadest and deepest sense, humane.

The best poetry is that which comes closest to the common experience of mankind, — gives form and colour to the feelings which enter every heart, — it is "the blossom and fragrance of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language." Thus it becomes true, as Wordsworth has said, that the poet is "the rock of defence of human nature, an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love."

It seems to me that we may discern in this truth, at least in part, one secret of the vitality and power of the Bible. There is no other book which lies so near to the great throbbing heart of the world. Its humanity is no less manifest, no less potent, than its divinity. There is life in it, and life is always interesting.

We need to be on our guard against any method of using or interpreting these Scriptures which would put them far away from us, or make them shadowy and unreal. When they are regarded chiefly as a collection of mystical charms, a mine where we may dig for

doctrines, or a compilation of forms of sound words, their best influence is lost. A desiccated Bible will have small power with anybody except the superstitious.

We ought to be grateful that it did not fall down from heaven like the fabulous statue of Diana of the Ephesians; nor was it whispered into any man's ear by a pigeon after the fashion in which Mahomet said that he received the Koran; but God caused it to grow upon the earth, and to draw into itself all that was noblest and purest in many generations of our fellow-men. We ought to remember that there is not a book in it, and hardly a chapter, the threads of which are not interwoven with the actual experience of a human life.

It is in this spirit that I have tried to write the story of some of the psalms. My desire has been to bring these ancient and sacred poems into close connection with the lives of the men who wrote them, — men of like passions, and sins, and trials, and hopes, and aspirations, with ourselves. To do this will not lessen our reverence for the psalms, and it may increase our love. For it will bring them home to us and give them the touch of reality. It will help us to understand that the depths of our nature, like the profundities of the ocean, are unchanged by the tides and tempests which play upon the surface, and that true religion is the same in every man and in every age.

New York City, *June*, 1887.

A LIST OF BOOKS.

In 1723 a painful scholar counted six hundred and thirty commentaries upon the Psalms. Since that time many more have been added. It has not seemed necessary for me to read all of these at present; but it may be profitable to give a short list of those books which I have found most helpful, and it will certainly be proper to acknowledge in this place my indebtedness to them.[1]

J. J. Stewart Perowne: The Book of Psalms. London: 1883. 2 vols.

Franz Delitzsch: Biblical Commentary on the Psalms. Clark's Foreign Theological Library. Edinburgh: 1884. 3 vols.

G. Heinrich A. v. Ewald: Commentary on the Psalms. London: Williams and Norgate: 1880. 2 vols.

James G. Murphy: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms. Andover: Warren F. Draper: 1875.

F. C. Cook, Canon of Exeter: The Book of Psalms. In the Speaker's Commentary, vol. iv. New York: Scribners: 1874.

William Alexander, Bishop of Derry: The Witness of the Psalms to Christ. New York: E. P. Dutton: 1877.

Thomas Chalmers Murray: The Origin and Growth of the Psalms. New York: Scribners: 1880.

Marvin R. Vincent: Gates into the Psalm Country. New York: Scribners: 1883.

Alexander Maclaren: The Life of David. London: Macmillan: 1880.

Samuel Cox: The Pilgrim Psalms. London: 1874.

Arthur Penrhyn Stanley: History of the Jewish Church. New York: Scribners: 1874. 3 vols.

C. A. Briggs: Messianic Prophecy. New York: Scribners: 1886.

[1] The translation which I have followed, with few exceptions, is that of the Revised Version.

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THE HEBREW HYMN-BOOK

THE HEBREW HYMN-BOOK

THERE is no room for doubt that the Christian Church, while careful to observe a due reverence for the whole Bible as her inspired rule of faith and practice, has always used a large liberty of affection towards its different books, and has taken some of them into her heart with a fondness which is not unreasonable, though it may be partial. Chief among these favourites is the Book of Psalms, — the fairest offspring of the Jews' religion, — which Christianity has adopted as if it were her own. There is certainly no other portion of the Hebrew Scriptures which can compare with it in favour or familiarity. And, whatever may be said by the disciples of the school of Shammai against such partiality, it may be answered that Christ and His apostles set the example, and the Church has followed it from the beginning until the present day.

Between the first verse of St. Matthew's Gospel and the last verse of St. John's Revelation, there are two hundred and eighty-three quotations from the Old Testament. One hundred and sixteen of them are from the Psalms. It was the first book which the early Church put into the hands of her young converts,

— the primer of her religious teaching; and no man could be admitted to the highest order of the clergy unless he knew the Psalter by heart. It was used for singing in the first assemblies for Christian worship, and has found a place in the public services of every historic church, — Greek, Roman, German, Swiss, French, Scotch, and English. It is the only one of the Hebrew books which is bound up with the New Testament as if it belonged there. And I think we may feel that this is not only natural, but also right, and that there are good reasons why we should care more for the Psalms than for any other portion of the Old Testament.

In this opening chapter it will not be possible to do more than sketch in outline the history of the book, and indicate the method in which we are to study it.

It was originally the Hymn-Book of the Jewish people. We are sure of this, not only from the tradition in regard to it, but also from the title which it bears in the Hebrew language. It is called *Tehillim*: "Praises," or "Songs of Praise." Our familiar English word, "Psalms," is the name which was given to it by those who spoke Greek. It means simply "Songs set to music." And the name "Psalter" is of like meaning, being derived, or, rather, transferred directly and almost letter for letter, from the Greek word for a stringed instrument, after the same fashion in which, nowadays, any collection of sacred poetry might be called "The Harp" or "The Lyre."

Now, if we take up one of our innumerable modern hymn-books, we may notice several characteristic fea-

tures in it. In the first place, we see that it has been compiled by some person or persons who cannot lay any claim to the authorship of the book. Then we observe that it includes the productions of many different writers, widely separated one from another, not only in time, but also in style. We perceive that most of these pieces are adapted for use in the public worship of the Church; but among them there are some of a more reflective and personal character, which are better fitted to be read than to be sung. And, finally, we shall find, at least in the latest and best books, that the compilers have given the authors' names, where they were known, and added now and then a note to tell how and when the hymn was written.

All of these features we may observe, if we read with candour and intelligence, in the Book of Psalms. We call it a book; but in fact there are five books here, distinctly separated, and each of them embracing the work of many different authors and periods. The First Book ends with the Forty-first Psalm, the Second Book with the Seventy-second, the Third Book with the Eighty-ninth, the Fourth Book with the One Hundred and Sixth, and the Fifth Book with the One Hundred and Fiftieth.

We do not know, and it would be vain to seek, who it was that brought these collections into their present form. Certainly the work was done after the Babylonish captivity; probably it was completed before the rise of the Maccabees and the translation of the Septuagint.[1] It is clear also that the compilation was made

[1] Murray, *Origin and Growth of the Psalms*, Lecture iv.

with a view to use in the services of the Second Temple,[1] and that those who made it gathered the best that they could find from the treasures of Hebrew sacred poetry in all the centuries past. No one man could have written a book like this. There are differences of thought and expression which go beyond the range of any single personality. The music is choral, manifold, harmonious. It touches all sides of human experience, and vibrates with distinct yet blended notes of joy and grief, hope and fear, faith and doubt, penitence and praise.

It was the custom of the early commentators to ignore all these differences, and maintain that David wrote all the psalms, either with his own hand or through the agency of others who were virtually his amanuenses. This view is manifestly absurd. It is as impossible to imagine that David was the author of "By the Rivers of Babylon," or "O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritance," as it would be to suppose that "My Country, 't is of Thee" was written by Dr. Watts. But the modern theory that none of the psalms are Davidic, is equally untenable. The truth lies between these two extremes. And when we speak, as we often do, of the whole collection as the "Psalms of David," we mean simply that he was the greatest among the sweet singers of Israel, and so the book naturally bears his name.[2]

We are free, then, to read these sacred lyrics in the light of history and criticism, and to try to discover, as

[1] Ewald, *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. i. p. 3.

[2] Perowne, vol. i. p. 10.

far as we can, the ages, the authors, and the circumstances from which they have come down to us. It is true that it is not necessary for us to do this. For, as pure poetry and as religious teaching, the psalms will always have their own value, independent of their age and authorship. But it is surely desirable for us to know as much about them as possible. Every point of contact that we can find between these songs and the lives of real men, every circumstance that links them to actual human experience, helps to illuminate and vivify their meaning. Just as we gain a new insight into "God moves in a mysterious way" from the knowledge of poor Cowper's attempt at suicide, and a better understanding of "One there is above all others" from the story of John Newton's strange life; just as "Lead, kindly Light" shines with a clearer radiance when we know about Newman's troubled voyage on the Mediterranean (and in spirit on more stormy waters), and "Abide with me" becomes more precious when we remember Henry Lyte's last Communion; so these ancient Hebrew psalms must be more valuable to us when, out of the far-distant past, we can catch some echoes, however faint, of their human histories.

In studying the psalms with such a purpose as this, we find three things to help us:

First of all are the inscriptions or titles which have been prefixed by the compilers of the book to many of the separate lyrics. There are one hundred and sixteen of these titles; and only thirty-four of the psalms, being without inscriptions, are called by the quaint Jewish writers "the orphans." In regard to

these titles, it is important to remember that they are not parts of the poems which they describe. They were added by later hands, just as the editor of a hymn-book adds his notes. They vary considerably in the different editions of the book. They have no inspired authority, and their correctness, like that of the superscriptions and postscripts of the New Testament Epistles,[1] is a fair subject for consideration and discussion, even among those who hold the strictest doctrine of inspiration. At the same time they are unquestionably of great antiquity, and it would be folly to reject them. It is safe to say that "they give us the earliest information we have as to the origin and authorship of these poems, and are therefore of priceless historical value."[2] They are to be accepted, if not with absolute confidence, yet with great respect, and corrected only where we have good grounds for believing that they are in error.

Our second help in tracing the authorship and date of the psalms, is to be found in their historical allusions. The mention of the fall of Poland and the death of Kosciusko in the "Pleasures of Hope" would justify us, in face of any tradition to the contrary, in saying that the poem must have been written at some time contemporaneous with, or subsequent to, these events. And in like manner an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem or the captivity of Zion makes us sure that the psalm which contains it could not have been written by David or Solomon.

The third means by which we are helped in following

[1] Perowne, vol. i. p. 104. [2] Murray, *Origin*, etc., p. 105.

the story of the psalms, is the analogy of style and language. This method ought to be used with the greatest care and modesty, for, even from a literary point of view, there is nothing more perilous and more likely to lead into folly than the self-confidence of what is called the Higher Criticism. But at the same time every man, every age, has a distinctive tone and manner of speech. And in determining whether a particular psalm was written by David or Solomon or Moses, we have a right to compare it with what we already know of the style and character of these men from their other writings and the age in which they lived.

Even with all these things to help us, there are many of the psalms which must remain practically anonymous and unconnected with any historical event. They come out of darkness, and we must take them simply for what they are to us, and not for what they were once to other men. And in regard to those whose authorship has been most fully discussed, it cannot be denied that wide differences of opinion have prevailed. There is a Jewish legend which alludes to this fact in a grimly humourous way. It tells how David in the other world, wishing to know what treatment he had received at the hands of his commentators, summoned them to appear before him. All of them, says the legend, had found their resting-place in the lower regions; but at his command they came running up with their books under their arms, and spread them open for his inspection. The great king asked them first of all what they had made out of the sixty-eighth psalm,

— one of the most difficult in the book. Upon this a babble of confusion arose, and all the learned men fell foul of each other with words and blows, disputing about its history and interpretation, until at last, driven frantic by their wrangling, David sent them all back to their home in Limbo.

If this present volume were large enough to take up all the psalms, or if it attempted to enter deeply into these vexed questions, it might involve us in the old disputes, and deserve to be consigned to the same place with the Jewish commentators. But since it deals only with a few of the simpler and more familiar psalms, and since it does not advance any conclusions dogmatically and by way of controversy, but only by way of probability and illustration, it may perhaps serve a useful though modest purpose, and throw a little light upon the story of some of these poems, which are better known and loved than any others in the world.

One thing we ought not to forget, — and perhaps this is the best place to speak of it, — and that is the part which the psalms have played in the history of our race. It is marvellous what deep hold they have taken upon the heart of humanity, and how ceaselessly they have reëchoed from the lips of men in every land and language. It seems, in truth, as old John Donne has said, that they are like manna, "which tasted to every man like that he loved best."

With the music of psalms the shepherds and ploughmen cheered their toil in ancient Palestine; and to the same music the Gallic boatmen kept time as they rowed

their barges against the swift current of the Rhone. A psalm supplied the daily grace with which the early Christians blessed their food; and the same psalm was repeated by the communicants as they went to the Lord's table. St. Chrysostom fleeing into exile; Martin Luther going to meet all possible devils at Worms; George Wishart facing the plague at Dundee; Wicliffe on his sick-bed, surrounded by his enemies; John Bunyan in Bedford gaol; William Wilberforce in a crisis when all his most strenuous efforts seemed in vain, and his noble plans were threatened with ruin,—all stayed their hearts and renewed their courage with verses from the psalms. The Huguenots at Dieppe marched to victory chanting the sixty-eighth psalm; and the same stately war-song sounded over the field of Dunbar. It was a psalm that Alice Benden sung in the darkness of her Canterbury dungeon; and the lips of the Roman Paulla, faintly moving in death, breathed their last sigh in the words of a psalm. The motto of England's proudest university is a verse from the Psalms; and a sentence from the same book is written above the loneliest grave on earth, among the snows of the Arctic circle. It was with the fifth verse of the thirty-first psalm that our Lord Jesus Christ commended his soul into the hands of God; and with the same words, St. Stephen, St. Polycarp, St. Basil, St. Bernard, St. Louis, Huss, Columbus, Luther, and Melanchthon — yea, and many more saints of whom no man knoweth — have bid their farewell to earth and their welcome to heaven.

And so it is that these psalms come to us with a

power and sweetness which have grown through all the centuries, a life precious and manifold. The breath of the Eternal is in them. But not this alone; for they breathe, also, the fragrance of all that is highest and best in the mortal.

II

A PRAYER OF MOSES THE MAN OF GOD

PSALM XC

THE PRAYER OF MOSES

In this psalm we hear the voice of the ages. Its language is filled with the solemn stateliness of a remote antiquity, and every phrase comes to us freighted with the experience of generations. Week after week, through many centuries, it has been read over the graves of thousands of the children of men, and there is probably no one dwelling in a Christian land who has not heard it repeated so often that its very words have become familiar. Yet I suppose there are many of us who have never associated it in any vital way with the history of its author, and some of us, perhaps, who have never even thought who wrote it.[1]

But, surely, there is something strangely significant in the idea that this funeral psalm antedates all the others, and that it was probably the utterance of the greatest man of the Hebrew race, one of the most colossal and heroic personages of all history, the man who led the grandest pilgrimage that ever crossed the earth, and talked face to face with God, and at last

[1] As evidence of the Mosaic authorship of this psalm, in addition to the general consent of critics, observe its resemblance to Deut. xxxii., xxxiii., and other discourses in the same book. Compare also v. 13 with Ex. xxxii. 12, and v. 15 with Deut. viii. 2. Read also the introduction to this psalm in Perowne's Commentary and in Delitzsch.

died in mysterious solitude, and was buried without the presence of human witnesses or the touch of human hands to lay him in the grave. If any one ought to know the meaning of our mortal existence, surely it is he. If any man is qualified to sum up, in few and weighty words, that experience which is common to us all, and make the personal application of that great sermon which every death preaches, surely this is the man. And we ought to be glad that he has done it. We have something better than any funeral address in this inspired Prayer of Moses, the Man of God.

The story of his life divides itself into three parts, each about forty years long. The first part, beginning with the romantic incident of the ark of bulrushes and the Egyptian princess, was passed in the splendour and luxury of a royal court.[1] He was born, according to the world's phrase, with a silver spoon in his mouth; and though he was a peasant's child, he enjoyed all the privileges that the most exalted rank and the most abundant wealth could give. But none of these things contented him. His soul was restless and ill at ease amid all the pomps and pleasures of Pharaoh's palace.[2] He longed to be free from the golden chains of an alien luxury. He longed to do something for his oppressed and down-trodden people, who were groaning under the yoke of the same capricious despotism which had lifted him to princely dignity. In his fortieth year he broke away with violence from all the entanglements of royal favour, and entered upon the second part of his life, a sojourn of forty years in the wild country of

[1] Ex. ii. 1–10.

[2] Heb. xi. 24–28.

Arabia. There he dwelt among the awful precipices and lonely valleys of Horeb, guarding the flocks of Jethro, his father-in-law, and communing in solitude with the Spirit of the living God.[1] It was a life of self-conquest, and discipline, and profoundest meditation on the great truths of religion. But even this did not satisfy him; for out of it there came the secret, resistless call to return to Egypt and take up the burden of his people's shame and trouble. And so he entered upon the third part of his life. Armed with no other symbol of authority than the shepherd's staff upon which he had leaned, and with which he had directed his sheep in the desert, he went back to the royal court to defy and overcome the king, to gather the children of Israel and lead them out through the wilderness to a new country and a new life.

This was his great work, for which all the preceding years had been only a preparation. In this work he succeeded, and failed. He accomplished the Divine purpose, but he did not accomplish his own hope. He made the Israelites a nation, but he left them without a country. He led them to the border of the promised land, but he never set his foot within it.[2] Only with his eyes did he behold its

"Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood,"

and then laid down his finished, uncompleted task, and sung his own funeral hymn. Forty years of almost superhuman labour as the uncrowned monarch of a great people; forty years of forbearance with the incredible folly and perversity of his followers; forty

[1] Ex. iii. 1–17. [2] Deut. xxxiv. 4.

years of homeless wandering as in a maze through a desert which might have been crossed in forty days; forty years of trouble, in which he had seen all his companions, save two, fall and die by the way; — and now it is all ended, and Moses, lifted in the spirit far above the level of the thoughts of ordinary men, will tell us in this psalm what it all means.

1. "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations." This is the first thought that comes into the mind of the venerable pilgrim. Solemn, majestic, tranquillizing, it rolls forth, like the deep music of a mighty organ, the truth of the eternal dwelling-place in God. It seems as if he must have been looking back into the far-distant past, retracing the line of his life through the labyrinth of the wilderness, and the terrors of Mount Sinai, and the waters of the Red Sea, and the struggle with the hard-hearted Pharaoh, and the lonely pastures of Horeb, and the perilous intrigues and uncongenial luxuries of the court, back to the time when he was cast out as a waif upon the waters, cradled only in the care of his Almighty Father, and remembering that through all these years his only true home had been in God. But his thought must have gone back even beyond this to the lives of those who had gone before him: Joseph and Jacob and Isaac and Abraham and Noah and Enoch, and all the fathers of the faith, — these also had been strangers upon earth and dwellers in God. A tent for the wandering body, but an everlasting mansion for the believing soul, — this is what Moses saw; this is what we can see, when we take a long, true look at life. Wherever thou art, if

thou believest in God, He is thy roof to shelter thee, He is thy hearth to warm thee, He is thy refuge and thy resting-place. If once thou hast found this home and entered it, thou canst not be defenceless or forlorn, for He who remains the same amid all uncertainties and changes, He whose goodness antedates creation and whose faithfulness outwears the mountains, He with whom there is no variableness nor shadow of turning, is thy habitation and thy God.

How this truth steadies and confirms the soul! It is like a great rock in the midst of hurrying floods; and from this standing-place we can look out serenely upon the mutabilities of life.

2. Thus Moses comes to his second thought; the strange contrast between the eternal God and His ephemeral creatures; the swift and shadowy course of mortal life under the changeless heavens. He had lived nearly twice as long as you and I can hope to live, and yet it all seemed to him like the flowing and ebbing of a rapid tide, the growth and withering of a field of grass, the imperceptible flight of a brief watch in the night. Doubtless there were peculiar facts in his own history which coloured his impressions, and which we can trace in the different verses of the psalm. He had seen the hosts of Egypt carried away with a flood; he had seen the sons of Korah cut down in a moment and consumed; he had seen the thousands who had come out with him from Egypt laid in their desert graves, because they had incurred the anger of God by their perversity and chosen to pass away their days in His wrath. But still his view of life is the same that has been taken by all wise men.

Life is a dream. While we are in it, it seems to be long and full of matter. But when it draws to an end, we realize that it has passed while the clock was striking on the wall. "As I look back," says the old man, "it seems to me but yesterday that I first knew I was alive."

Life is a troubled dream. It does not flow smoothly. It has moments of distress and fear. And the cause of its disturbance is our secret sin which God sets in the light of His countenance. Our physical transgressions against the laws of our wellbeing, which bear their fruits in aches and pains and infirmities; our spiritual transgressions, the evil passions of anger and envy and lust, which we have harbored in our hearts until they have filled us with conflict and discontent; all those faults and follies of which we in our blindness were ignorant, but which the All-wise God could not help seeing, have sown the seeds of trouble, and we have reaped the harvest of grief.

Life is an unfinished dream. Even when it is drawn out to its full length, even when an uncommon strength enables us to carry the burden on beyond the limit of threescore and ten, the thread is suddenly cut off, and we fly away in haste. Death is always a surprise. Men are never quite ready for it. The will is left unwritten. The enterprise halts uncompleted. The good deed is not accomplished. The man who says, "I will devote my fortune now to the service of God and humanity," flies away suddenly, and his wealth is squandered by the spendthrift heir. The man who resolves to be reconciled to his enemy and die at peace with all

mankind, is cut off in a moment, and the words of repentance and forgiveness are never spoken. It is the old story. Moses, who lived one hundred and twenty years, died too soon, for he never entered the land of his pilgrimage, and his dream was left unfinished.

Well, then, life is a disappointment. But do you not see that if you have learned this beforehand, it can never disappoint you? The mistake is that we expect too much from the world. We find fault with it, and mourn over it, and berate it, because it is not heaven. But indeed it is a very good world, if we will only take it for what it is. It is a place of pilgrimage, and surely pilgrimage has its advantages and pleasures. It is a place of discipline, and surely adversity hath its sweet uses. It is the place where our years pass away like a tale that is told; but then remember that it is God who is telling the tale; and if we will only listen to Him in the right spirit, the progress of the story will be wonderfully interesting and its sequel wonderfully glorious. For this is the secret of it all, that life is not broken off short, but carried on in another sphere; and the one thing that we need to learn now is how to live so that the first volume shall be good and the second shall have the promise of being better.

3. So Moses comes to his prayer, which is at once a petition to God and an instruction to men. It shows us what things we ought to desire and ask, in view of the shortness of life; and it urges us, by a logic which does not need words, to set ourselves earnestly to the attainment of these desires. For there is no good in

praying for anything unless you will also try for it. All the sighs and supplications in the world will not bring wisdom to the heart that fills itself with folly every day, or mercy to the soul that sinks itself in sin, or usefulness and honour to the life that wastes itself in vanity and inanity.

There are three chief things here for which Moses prayed, and for which he laboured, and which, by the favour of God, he received.

First, such a sense of the brevity of life as to lead to its utmost improvement. If your cup is small, fill it to the brim. Let it be *multum in parvo*. Make the most of your opportunities of honest work and pure pleasure. If we had twice as much time to spend, we could not afford to squander any of it on vain regrets, or anxious worriments, or idle reveries. The best thing that we can get is what the text calls "a heart of wisdom"; for such a heart is full of medicine for the day of sickness, and music for the day of sadness, and strength for the day of trial, and riches for eternity. Remember that what you possess in the world will be found at the day of your death to belong to some one else; but what you are, will be yours forever.

The second thing for which Moses prays is such an early sense of the mercy of God as to fill every day with joy. And the word "early," which is used here, means "in the morning," at the beginning of life. It is a great blessing to know God in childhood, so that not a single day need be passed in ignorance of His merciful kindness, not a single trial need be borne without His help, not a single pleasure need be en-

joyed as if it were the careless gift of chance or the theft of our own cleverness. Moses had a life like this: he belonged to God in the morning, and he rejoiced in His mercy until the evening. There are many who have had the same privilege, and some who have thoughtlessly thrown it away. Let us be sure that a whole life spent with God is better than half a life. There is no satisfaction in anything without His mercy; therefore seek it at once. It is better late than never, but it is far better early than late.

The third thing for which Moses prays is a share in the work and glory and beauty of God. The words in which he asks for this are magnificent and full of meaning. 'Let thy work appear unto thy servants; give us some knowledge of thy great and holy purposes; let us see thy beneficent activity in the world; and let the glorious accomplishment of thy plans be manifest unto our children. Send thy beauty upon us; order and harmonize our designs according to thy great wisdom; and establish thou the work of our hands; build the little stones, which we can hew and polish, into thy great cathedral, so that they shall endure forever; yea, the work of our hands, establish thou it.'

This is the deepest prayer of every true man and woman. We cannot bear to think that all our hopes and labours must vanish into thin air as soon as we are gone. We long to leave something behind us which shall last, some influence of good which shall be transmitted through our children, some impress of character or action which shall endure and perpetuate

itself. There is only one way in which we can do this, only one way in which our lives can receive any lasting beauty and dignity; and that is by being taken up into the great plan of God. Then the fragments of broken glass glow with an immortal meaning in the design of his grand mosaic. Then our work is established, because it becomes part of His work.

And so the psalm ends with a large and hopeful look towards the future, as it began with a reverent and grateful look towards the past. It has been well said that it stands like the pillar of cloud and fire which followed Moses through the desert. One side is dark, the other side is bright. For when we look towards the earth we see the shadow of death, and hear the voice which cries, "All flesh is grass." But when we look towards heaven we see the light of God, and hear that other voice which says, "For they rest from their labours, and their works do follow them."

III

A SHEPHERD'S SONG ABOUT HIS SHEPHERD

PSALM XXIII

A SHEPHERD'S SONG.

THIS is a shepherd's song in praise of his Shepherd. We all know who wrote it, and about Whom it was written. The boy David who kept his father's flocks upon the hills of Bethlehem, and the good Lord who took care of him while he was minding the sheep, — the faithful human guardian and the all-merciful Divine Protector, — these are the two figures that rise before us, as we hear the music of this heavenly pastoral floating down beside the still waters and across the green pastures and through the quiet valleys of that mountain-land.

There are many who think that this psalm was not actually composed until the later years of David's life. They regard it as a reminiscence of his youth, seen through the mellowing mists of far-away years, and growing more beautiful as the landscape wins enchantment from distance. They think that the table spread in the presence of enemies is an allusion to the hospitality of Barzillai when David was flying from Absalom;[1] that the thought of the valley of the shadow of death is the natural apprehension of one who has not many more years to live; and that the spirit of tranquil confidence

[1] 2 Sam. xvii. 27–29.

which pervades the psalm is like the glow of light upon the sunset clouds, the calm brightening of the day which draws to its close.

It may be so. Certainly it is possible for an aged person to use this psalm in the serenity of tender and blessed memories. But it seems to me more probable that it was written in the days of David's youth, and that the peaceful light which shines through it is the glow of the dawning, rather than of the declining, day.

For observe, it is a psalm of hope: "I shall not want," "I shall not fear," "Goodness and mercy shall follow me," "I shall dwell." And hope is the angel of the young, as memory is the angel of the old. Observe also that the table spread in the midst of danger can be referred most naturally to the shelter and refreshment which David, dwelling among the highlands, may have given to some fugitive fleeing from robbers or from the vengeance of his foes. There were doubtless many such refugees coming into the hill-country, some of whom the shepherd David may have concealed and entertained, as the warm-hearted Scotch shepherds sheltered the Young Pretender a century ago. The anointing of the head with oil, if it is to be connected with any definite event, suggests the day when the ruddy shepherd-lad was called in from the fields to receive the royal chrism from the hands of old Samuel.[1] And as for the allusion to the valley of the death-shade, surely we know that the young think and talk about death more frequently than the old.

[1] 1 Sam. xvi. 1–13.

It is the youthful poet who binds the sad garlands of myrtle about his head, and sings the most melancholy strains about "The Weeping Willow" and "Under the Daisies." The flight of years, the familiarity with life's vicissitudes, the very habit of living, seem to make the grave more distant and unreal to the old man than it appears to the child. It is strange, but true, that this poetic reference to the dark shadow is one of the very things which make this psalm come more naturally from David's earlier, than from his later, years.

At all events, we shall all agree that it is a good psalm for children to learn; and that much of its peculiar beauty comes from its close connection with the story of the shepherd-boy who once watched his flocks near the village in which the Good Shepherd was born.

In order to understand the full meaning of this little song and feel its perfect charm, we need, first of all, to remember how different is the life of a shepherd in Syria from that of his brother in England or America; and how much closer is the tie which binds him to his helpless charge in a wild, unsettled country, where robbers and fierce beasts abound, than it can possibly be among the peaceful hill-pastures of Vermont, or in the smooth meadows of a city park. Here you shall see the sheep left to take care of themselves, or driven about from one feeding ground to another by a man who seems to be little more than a policeman to them. But in Palestine the shepherd must be the "guide, philosopher, and friend" of his flock. He must think where he can find, amid the drought of burning summer, the narrow strips of herbage on which they can

feed, and the unfailing springs where they can drink. He must be ready to rescue them from the fury of mountain torrents when they rise in flood. He must guard them against the attacks of wild animals, as he leads them through the black defiles of the hills where the shadows of rocks and bushes hide the crouching forms of death. Thus David had to meet and slay the lion and the bear to save his flock.[1] He must be prepared to evade or repel the crafty assaults of brigands who will not hesitate to kill him in order to carry away his sheep. I have read lately of a faithful man, between Tiberias and Tabor, who "actually fought three Bedouin robbers until he was cut to pieces by their knives, and laid down his life among the sheep he was defending."[2] The very presence of dangers like these, the vast loneliness of the desolate hillsides, the absence of all human intercourse and sympathy, the community of hardship and of pleasure in the vicissitudes of the seasons, create a living bond between the human protector and his dumb companions.[3] The shepherd knows his sheep and calls them by name. He does not drive them before him as he moves from place to place. He walks in front of them and calls. They follow him for they know his voice.[4] Great as the difference between them and him may be, their lives are joined together. He gives them more than protection, — a tender, watchful care. They give him more than obedience, — a dumb, trustful love.

[1] 1 Sam. xvii. 34–36.

[2] W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book.*

[3] F. W. Robertson, Sermons, *The Good Shepherd*, p. 406.

[4] St. John x. 3, 4, 5, 14, 15.

Now something like this was the life which the youngest son of Jesse lived with his father's flocks among the uplands of Judea. There might be feasting at Bethlehem where the seven tall brethren sat around their father's table; but David was away on the hills, with his frugal fare spread upon the grass, and water of the brook for his drink.[1] There might be fighting on the border against the Philistines; Eliab, Abinadab, and Shammah might be glorying in the excitement and bustle of Saul's camp; but David, who had gone up now and then to soothe the dark monarch with the music of the harp, had been sent back again to the lonely fields to feed the sheep.[2] Silence, solitude, the flocks noiselessly moving about him, the eagle sailing in slow circles above his head,[3] the dawn struggling with night on the far-away hills, the dewdrops sparkling on the grass, the loud stream rushing through its rocky bed, the black shadows deepening in the narrow glen, the sheep gathering nearer to him and couching themselves in the twilight, the distant roar of the lion, the great stars sliding through the night, the trembling fugitive sharing his plain food as they looked down together from some safe eyrie upon the pastures below, — these were the forms and colours of David's early life; and out of them he weaves a beautiful garment to clothe his thought of God.

"All that I try to do for these helpless sheep," says David to himself one day, when he is resting in a hollow of the hills, and looking out at his well-tended

[1] 1 Sam. xvi. 11. [2] 1 Sam. xvii. 13, 14, 15.

[3] Robert Browning's Poems, "Saul," xii.

charge, "all the watchfulness and kindness and protection and provident companionship which I give to them, God has bestowed upon me in infinitely greater measure. He has directed my course, and supplied my wants, and given me the power to enjoy this lonely life, and taken care of me amid all its dangers. Truly my father's sheep are well tended. But as for me, — the Lord is *my* Shepherd." And so the joyful song rises from the midst of the feeding sheep, and flows out to gladden and strengthen the heart of the world.

There are three notes in it upon which we may well fix our attention: The note of contentment, the note of courage, and the note of confidence.

1. Contentment is expressed in the first three verses, summing themselves up in the words "I shall not," or I can not, "want." They remind us of that little boy whom Bunyan saw in his dream,[1] minding his sheep in the Valley of Humiliation, and singing to himself as he sat alone.

"He that is down need fear no fall,
"He that is low, no pride;
"He that is humble ever shall
"Have God to be his guide.

"I am content with what I have,
"Little be it or much;
"And, Lord, contentment still I crave,
"Because thou savest such."

That is feeble poetry but strong sense; and it rhymes with the twenty-third Psalm.

[1] *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Part II., p. 444.

David had very little of what we should call luxury, or abundance, or even comfort, in his early life. Plain fare, a lowly couch, the simplest pleasures: but he was satisfied. He felt his soul restored and enriched by the green pastures and the still waters. He knew that God would never fail to provide him with such things as he really needed. It would be well for us, amid the complexity and anxiety of our modern life, if we could catch something of his spirit. For the most part, our distress, our poverty, our carking care come, not from the smallness of our provisions, but from the largeness of our pampered desires. We are afraid that we shall not always have cake, and so we forget that God has promised that His children shall not lack bread. We begin to put our foolish trust in gold, in clever enterprises, in wise investments, in daring speculations, because the things that we want are so numerous and so costly. A little plain living would lead to higher thinking. It would do us good, it would do our children good, if we should learn that the real necessities and the best joys of human life are very simple, and for these we have a right always to trust God.

Why should we be disturbed, and harassed, and filled with gloom, at the chances of commerce and the changes of business? Our peace of mind is worth more than all things else, and this we can keep in a log cabin or in a hut of turf. Is not this the lesson which Christ would have us learn from the lilies and the sparrows? God may give us more or less, but so long as we are content, it will always be enough and we can not want.

2. The note of courage rings out in the fourth verse, and is expressed in the words "I will fear no evil." Observe, he does not say that no evil will ever come to him. For he knows well enough that there are many grievous things in life, and hard to bear. There are perils and pains and persecutions; there are sharp conflicts and sore wounds; and at the last there is a shadowed valley where each one of us must receive the mortal thrust. We can not get through these things without suffering. But do we not know that infinitely more suffering is caused by needless fear than by actual disaster? Do we not know that more than half our trouble is borrowed? Just suppose that we could get rid of all unnecessary and previous terror; just suppose that we could be sure of final victory in every conflict, and final emergence out of every shadow into brighter day; how our hearts would be lightened, how much more bravely we should work and fight and march forward! This is the courage to which we are entitled and which we may find in the thought that God is with us everywhere. He will not let any one destroy us. We may be hurt, but we can never be harmed. The course of our journey has been appointed by Him, He knows the way even through the darkness, and its goal is in His bosom. Be of good cheer, your Shepherd has overcome the world.

3. The note of confidence rises in the fifth and sixth verses of David's song, and culminates in the words, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." He is sure that he is already in God's house. And why? Because he finds his table spread and his head anointed,

because his bounties are great and his joy is deep, because he is satisfied and happy, he knows that this world must be the dwelling-place of God, and he feels like a child under his Father's roof.

But will this always continue? Will not his raptures vanish, and his cup grow empty, and the sense of being at home in the world which is so beautiful a trait of childhood give place to the feeling of estrangement which so often marks old age? No; for David is confident that the Divine goodness and mercy will always follow him to remind him where he is. And this is true for us all, if we will only see it. There are a hundred touches of kindness that come to us every day to tell us that we are not orphans or outcasts upon the earth. Every trace of order, every gleam of beauty, every provision of bounty in the natural world, is an evidence that it is God's house. "For he hath not left himself without a witness, in that he did good, and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness." [1] There is no reason why we should ever lose this deep and joyful sense of domesticity in God's world. The discoveries of science need not take it from us, but only deepen its wonder and reverence. I remember one of the wisest of modern scientific men, whom it was my privilege to know well. He kept the cheerful faith of a little child, and whether he was botanizing in his garden, or geologizing on the top of some high mountain, he rejoiced like one who was at home in the house of his Father.

But then, if this is what the world is, how will it be when we have to leave it? Will not that be like going

[1] Acts xiv. 17.

out into the darkness? No, says our shepherd, for this is only a part of the great mansion; there are many rooms in it; our departure is only a going from one story into another; wherever the child of God may be, this is sure, that he will "dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

We are far from wishing to read any meaning into the words of David which they will not bear, or to interpret his experience on the lines of our faith. There may have been much that was misty and imperfect in his views of a future life, compared with ours. But surely, if language means anything, these words point us to a secure and happy future, — an unbroken, perpetual, conscious fellowship with God. And so the song ends with an onward motion and an upward flight.

It has been said that this psalm is like the nightingale, whose music charms the world. But the nightingale sings only at night, and this is a morning song. There is another bird whose melody gives us a sweeter and brighter comparison. The first time that I ever heard the skylark was on the great plain of Salisbury. Sheep were feeding and shepherds were watching near by. From the contentment of her lowly nest in the grass the songstress rose on quivering wings, pouring out a perfect flood of joy. With infinite courage the feathered atom breasted the spaces of the sky, as if her music lifted her irresistibly upward. With sublime confidence she passed out of sight into the azure; but not out of hearing, for her cheerful voice fell yet more sweetly through the distance, as if it were saying, "Forever, forever!"

IV

A SONG FROM A CAVE
TO THE TUNE "DESTROY NOT"

PSALM LVII

A SONG FROM A CAVE

DAVID'S confidence that he should always dwell in the house of the Lord was put to a severe test very early in his experience. For the title of this psalm, which there is good reason for accepting as accurate,[1] tells us that it was written in a cave, when the psalmist was a fugitive before the wrath of Saul.

There were two occasions on which David took refuge in a cavern. The first was when he occupied the cave of Adullam as a stronghold (1 Sam. xxii. 1); the second was when he dwelt among the labyrinth of caverns in the wilderness of Engedi (1 Sam. xxiii. 29). It is possible to ascribe the psalm to either of these occasions, but it seems to me that it fits in more naturally with the latter than with the former.[2]

Let us, then, endeavor to trace in a rapid way the path which leads from the green pastures of Bethlehem

[1] Note the coincidences between this psalm and others of the same group. The opening supplication (lvi. 1, lvii. 1); the comparison of enemies to lions (lvii. 4, vii. 2); the tongue spoken of as a sword (lvii. 4, lix. 7); the digging of a pit by the wicked (lvii. 6, vii. 15); the refuge under the shadow of God's wings (lvii. 1, xxxvi. 7).

[2] Mark the suddenness of David's flight from the personal pursuit of Saul (1 Sam. xxiii. 26), and the application of verse 6 of the psalm to the trap into which Saul fell while he was trying to catch David (1 Sam. xxiv.).

to the mouth of this black cave among the rocks of Engedi, and follow the course of events which transformed David from a happy, care-free shepherd-boy, into an outlawed chief, a popular hero, and the involuntary rival of Saul for the throne of Israel.

I say the involuntary rival; for it is clear that David did not thrust himself into a public life, or seek to climb by his own efforts to a position of royal dignity. He was quite content with his lonely liberty among the sheep on the hills. It may be that he even preferred that condition to any other; and it is certain that he was happier in those free, untroubled days than he ever was afterwards. But it was not his privilege to choose his own career. He was not permitted to remain in the place of his birth and in the delightful occupations of his boyhood. The doom of greatness was upon him. He was destined and called to a loftier and a harder lot. There is something sublime in the self-forgetfulness, the absolute indifference to outward circumstances, and the absolute submission to the Divine will, with which David moved forward to meet this destiny.[1]

The first link in the chain was the solemn anointing of the shepherd-lad by the hands of the prophet Samuel.[2] David did not seek this for himself; he did not come running in among his brethren to claim the blessing. They had to send out to the fields to find him; and when he came he received the honour meekly and in silence.

[1] *Lyra Apostolica*, lvii. Quoted by Dean Stanley, *Hist. of Jewish Church*, vol. ii. p. 55.

[2] 1 Sam. xvi. 11.

The next link was the command of King Saul that Jesse should send his youngest son to play upon his harp in the royal presence, and soothe the melancholy which had fallen upon the soul of that strange monarch.[1] And here again David was perfectly passive. It was the report of some nameless young man, who had heard the little shepherd's music by chance, which brought him to the royal notice. He obeyed the message with the loyal simplicity of a child, thinking not of his own advancement, but only how he might serve and comfort his liege lord, — the mighty hero, the splendid head of Israel, who was so mysteriously tormented by an evil spirit. The whole range of history does not afford a more beautiful illustration of true-hearted devotion of a subject to his king; nor do I know where we can find a more attractive picture of the heavenly power of music to calm and to console the human spirit. Robert Browning has written perhaps his grandest poem upon this theme. It is entitled "Saul." And if you have patience to bear with the curious inversions and perversions of his style, it is as good a commentary as you can read upon this part of David's life. We see here the beginning of that passionate admiration, that deep and tender love, that unswerving pity and devotion which he always cherished (even through the undeserved persecutions and the unsought conflicts of later years) for his noble, misguided, unhappy, self-destroyed master and benefactor.

The third link in the chain was the combat with the Philistine giant, Goliath. In this also David was

[1] 1 Sam. xvi. 19.

innocent of selfish ambition. He was drawn into the fight by the circumstance of his presence in the camp on an humble errand of service from his father to his elder brethren.[1] His only thought was to uphold the honour of his country against the taunts of this big, blustering foreigner. And his singular victory was borne by him in the spirit of modesty and meekness. But the world was not willing to let the giant-killer escape unnoticed.[2] Saul sent for him and raised him at once to the third highest position in the kingdom. The soul of Jonathan the crown-prince was knit to him in the bonds of an admiring friendship which has become ideal and proverbial. The people welcomed him with rapturous applause to the loftiest pinnacle of popularity.

In all this David behaved himself wisely. But Saul — alas, poor Saul! — behaved like a fool. For when he heard those excitable women of Israel, who had once worshipped him as their greatest hero, coming out to meet the returning army, with timbrels and instruments of music, dancing and singing, —

> "Saul hath slain his thousands,
> "And David ten thousands,"

he was very wroth. Envy, the besetting devil of great men who are not quite equal to their greatness, took possession of his heart, changed his love into hatred, and filled his breast with gall. Sullenly, with dark and bloodshot looks, he eyed the unconscious rival of his fame.[3] And now begins that long struggle of David's loyalty and wisdom to escape, without resisting, the jealous fury of a madman who was at the same time his

[1] 1 Sam. xvii. 17. [2] 1 Sam. xviii. 1–7. [3] 1 Sam. xviii. 9.

king and the father of his dearest friend. Think what it must have been for David to live in an atmosphere like this, charged with an electric force which might break forth at any moment; think what it must have been to stand singing to his harp before his master, and to see that great spear dart from the darkness like a flash of lightning and quiver in the wall behind him; to feel that every honour conferred upon him might conceal a death-trap, and that every step of advancement was meant to be a step towards destruction; to know that Jonathan was being urged to sacrifice the friend to the father and assassinate his beloved companion; to have the hand of the eldest princess offered to him and withdrawn without a reason, and then to be married to the younger Michal that she might become a snare to him; to see once more the spear of his father-in-law lifted to slay him, and to be forced to fly like a criminal under the cover of night,[1] — all this must have been unspeakably hard and bitter to such an open, brave, honourable man as David. I reckon he thought that sheep were pleasanter companions than courtiers, and that a raging bear was less to be dreaded than an angry monarch.

He has told us how he felt, in the fifty-ninth Psalm. This is described in the title as having been written when Saul sent his servants (after that last affair of the spear) to watch David's house and kill him when he came out. Its contents correspond with the situation. Looking down, perhaps from the house-top, he sees his enemies lying in wait for him. He hears them going

[1] 1 Sam. xix. 10.

about through the shadows, growling and snarling like dogs.[1] He knows that he has been guilty of no transgression to deserve their hatred. He prays that they may be smitten for their lies, and scattered like the homeless dogs which they are imitating.[2] He is secure in his innocence; for loftier even than the strong house in which he is hidden with his faithful princess Michal, safe against all the assaults of wicked men, is his high tower, the God of mercy.[3] Then he makes his escape, by the aid of his wife, through the window of the house; and feeling that Saul's enmity is incurable, he flees into the country and becomes an outlaw.

There are several psalms ascribed to this period of his life. The seventh was written concerning the words of Cush the Benjamite, a wicked man who slandered him. The fifty-second was written when Doeg the Edomite told Saul about the visit of the fugitive to Ahimelech, and thus brought destruction upon the poor little city of Nob. The fifty-sixth was written when the Philistines took him in Gath, and he had to feign insanity in order to make them let him go. The thirty-fourth was written after this narrow escape, probably when he was beginning to gather a larger band of followers around him at Adullam, and to find favour with the people by acting as a sort of irregular police to the neighborhood.[4] Through all these perils and wanderings David kept two things: his firm faith in God and his loyal reverence for the person of Saul. The king was hunting him like a wild goat among the rocks, like a par-

[1] Ps. lix. 6.
[2] Ps. lix. 13–15.
[3] Ps. lix. 16, 17.
[4] 1 Sam. xxiii. 1–5.

tridge among the mountains; but his only defence was in flight. There is even a touch of humour in the words with which he describes himself to Saul. "After whom dost thou pursue? After a dead dog, after a flea."[1] He seems to rely solely upon his insignificance and agility. He will not present himself as a foeman worthy of the royal steel. He will not lift his hand against the Lord's anointed, his whilom hero and friend. He will not fight, but run. And in his very flight he shows the noble courage of one who has conquered himself and trusts in God.

So we come to the cave of Engedi, high up among the cliffs, looking down by the sparkling fountain of the wild goats and the little plain covered with palm-trees, to the gloomy waters of the Dead Sea.

We see the band of outlaws sheltered in their cavern among the rocks, and watching the host of their baffled pursuers. We see the fierce king, wearied with his vain chase, turning aside from his followers, and coming into the shadow of that very cavern to rest. We see David holding back his unruly men from the vengeance which seemed to have been put by God into their hands. We see him bending in compassion above his unconscious foe, sparing him for the sake of old times, cutting a piece from his long robe instead of cutting his throat. We hear him calling after the king as he departs, showing the fragment of the garment, and protesting by this token the sincerity of his friendship. We see the great tears rolling down Saul's wasted face as he confesses his wrong-doing and implores David's

[1] 1 Sam. xxiv. 14.

forgiveness.[1] And now when the king has gone, conquered by kindness, we hear the outlaw singing this psalm of the hiding-place.

The very tune to which it is set is significant. For the title informs us that it was sung to an air called "*Destroy not;*"[2] and its first word is a prayer that God would exercise towards David that same mercy which David had just exercised towards his helpless enemy Saul. It reminds us of the saying of the great Son of David, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."[3]

We have not time to take up all the verses of this psalm in order; but we see here four pictures of the soul, which we may well consider as jewels found in the cave.

1. The soul sheltered under the wings of God.

Verse 1. "In the shadow of thy wings I take refuge."

How exquisite is the beauty of this figure, and how perfect is the spiritual repose which it expresses! David was not content with an image drawn from the cavern in which he had found shelter. It was not enough for him to say that the care in which he confided was like the great walls and overarching roof of the cave. He felt that God was nearer than these, that He brooded above His people as a mother-bird covers her nest with her own feathers. High in the air the cruel hawks go sailing by; but they cannot reach the nest; even their black shadows cannot fall upon it so long as it is protected by the shadow of

[1] 1 Sam. xxiv. 17–22. [2] *Al-tashheth.* Cf. Is. lxv. 8.
[3] St. Matt. v. 7.

those other, greater wings. Do you remember who it was that looked down sorrowfully from the Hill of Olives and said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings!"[1] It is the same figure, consecrated by the Divine lips; and it teaches us that there is a great sheltering love which is closer to us than any evil can ever come, hiding us securely, not only from harm, but also from fear. For here, it seems to me, is the peculiar beauty of the simile. It makes a shadow our defence from shadows. The only thing that can really darken the soul is something coming between it and God; but that is impossible so long as the soul remembers His presence and love. He touches us on every side with His compassionate care. The troubles and pains of life are all outside of that; they are away beyond the protecting wings, floating by, like little clouds, like hovering hawks; we can wait in security until these "calamities be overpast." Troubles far off: God very near. Calamities belong to time: peace is part of eternity.

2. The soul sleeping among fierce beasts.

Verse 4. "My soul is among lions."

Here the figure changes, and we hear David describing the perils of his situation. He is like the hunter reclining at night in a forest, where fiery eyes gleam upon him through the darkness, and savage roarings shake the silence all around him. He is like Daniel when he was cast into the lions' den. It is not that his confidence is weakened; but only that his

[1] St. Matt. xxiii. 37.

sense of the surrounding dangers is deepened and he would give a most vivid picture of them. And indeed it is always well that we should realize our perils in the world. Let us enhance and magnify our security; but let us remember at the same time how much we need it, how many and how cruel are the enemies of the soul. This earth is not a Garden of Eden; not even a menagerie where all the dangerous animals are caged. There are plenty of wild beasts roaming about, ready to bite and devour.

There is something particularly apt and striking in the way in which David puts all the power of his foes in their mouths, and describes them as being full of "spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword." It seems as if he cared less for their attacks upon his life than for their assaults upon his character. What they tried to do to him did not hurt him so much as what they said about him. And in this we can all sympathize with David. For our most dangerous enemies are those who threaten us with their mouths, and the sharpest thrusts we have to bear are those of the slanderous tongue, more swift and treacherous than Saul's great spear.

Cannibalism is dying out among the barbarous tribes: the Fiji islanders have given it up; but it still survives among the most highly civilized peoples. You might find yourself in some difficulty if you invited a company of friends to a feast in which the principal dish was to be a well-roasted neighbor. Everybody would refuse with horror, and you would probably be escorted to the nearest lunatic asylum. But if you

wish to serve up somebody's character at a social entertainment, or pick the bones of somebody's reputation in a quiet corner, you will find ready guests and almost incredible appetites. How cruel are the tender mercies of the wicked! How eager and indiscriminate is the hunger of gossip! How quick some men are to take up an evil report, and roll it as a sweet morsel under their tongues, and devour their neighbors, yes, even their friends! Perhaps some of my readers are doing it even now, chewing the cud in secret. "Yes," you are saying, "this passage applies to so and so. And he certainly is a dreadful gossip. I remember he told me" — Stop, friend, the passage was written for you and me. It is of our souls that the fable is narrated, warning us each one to set a guard upon our tongue and upon our thoughts of our fellowmen. Remember that charity thinketh no evil, much less repeats it. There are two good rules which ought to be written upon every heart. Never believe anything bad about anybody, unless you positively know that it is true. Never tell even that, unless you feel that it is absolutely necessary, and that God is listening while you tell it. If you will follow these rules you may lie down in peace among the lions, for you will not be one of them; and God will take care of you if you keep your lips from evil and your heart from guile.

3. The soul awaking with a song.

Verse 8. "Awake up my glory: awake psaltery and harp:
"I myself will awake right early."

Thus the verse runs in our English version: but David wrote something much more bold and poetic.

For the last word is not an adverb but a noun; it means "the morning." And David's thought was that the joy in his heart would arise even before the daylight. While the fringe of night's mantle was still resting upon the earth, while the birds were silent in the hush of twilight and the winds still waiting with folded wings among the hills, his glory, that is his soul, would be up and stirring, and his glad song would fly out among the vanishing shadows, and he himself would "awake the dawn."[1]

A good night makes a good morning. When the eyes have closed with pure and peaceful thoughts, they are refreshed with the sleep which God giveth to his beloved, and they open with cheerful confidence and grateful pleasure. To the jaded worldling, to the envious grumbler, to the anxious, eager worshipper of wealth, to the slave of unholy passions and the doubter of God's goodness, the new day comes as a care, a burden, a bringer of trouble. There is redness of eyes and heaviness of head and reluctance of spirit. But to those who trust in the Lord and do good, to those who lie down with thoughts of His mercy and truth, it matters not whether they awake in a curtained chamber or in a wild cavern, "the light is sweet, and it is a pleasant thing to behold the sun." And it is well also when the spiritual powers are roused with the physical. It is well when the soul is active and excited; moved and

[1] "A cithern used to hang above David's bed; and when midnight came the north wind blew among the strings, so that they sounded of themselves; and forthwith he arose and busied himself with the Tôra until the pillar of the dawn ascended." Talmud, B. Berachoth 3. b., quoted by Delitzsch.

thrilled by feeling, as the flowers in the field are stirred by the morning breeze. Then the sweet odours flow out. The bells do not ring until they swing. The birds do not please us until they leave their nests and begin to warble their sweet notes. And even David's piety has not fulfilled itself until it has made him "praise God among the people and sing unto Him among the nations."

So, then, we can see the outlaw rising from his rude couch, taking his harp from its resting-place, and sweeping his hand joyously over its strings as he comes down through the shadows of the cave. He stands in the cavern's mouth. He looks out upon the trickling fountain, and the rich verdure which marks its course through the little oasis among the limestone cliffs.[1] He sees the last star fading in the sky, the faint glow creeping up the eastern horizon, the stir of life upon the face of the earth, the sun lifting himself beyond the Dead Sea and rejoicing as a strong man to run a race. But he sees more than this. He sees an image of something spiritual and transcendent. For here in the last verse of the Psalm we find the fourth picture.

4. The soul watching the sunrise of God.

Verse 11. "Be thou exalted, O God above the heavens.
"Let thy glory be above all the earth."

The thought of the Divine excellence and beauty, how far it is exalted above us and yet how sweetly it shines upon us, how it belongs to the lofty and eternal sphere of heaven, but also to the lowly and familiar

[1] Stanley, *Sinai and Palestine*, p. 289.

sphere of earth, how it rises like the sun, far away from us, and yet sheds its light and joy upon us and upon every living thing, — this is the most sublime, comforting, and elevating thought that can ever visit the soul. It does not matter so much, after all, what happens to us, whether we are obscured or honoured, whether we are praised or condemned, whether we are lifted up or cast down, provided only we can see God rising above the horizon, and filling not alone the heaven, but also the earth, with His glory. The triumph of His truth, the spread of His gospel, the victory of His redeeming love over the darkness of sin, — these are our triumphs and joys. For the Lord God is our sun, and while He shines we are happy and the world is bright.

V

A MARCHING CHORUS

Psalm XXIV

A MARCHING CHORUS

THERE is a great change between the music of this psalm and that to which we have just been listening. Here we have no longer the plaintive solo of a solitary minstrel, but the choral song of a multitude:

> "An awful, jubilant voice,
> With a music strange and manifold,
> Flows forth on a carol free and bold,
> As when a mighty people rejoice,
> With shawms, and cymbals, and harps of gold;
> And the tumult of their acclaim is rolled
> Through the open gates of the city afar." [1]

We have come out of the wilderness of exile; we have left the dark shadow of the cavern among the rocks: we stand now upon the hills that guard Jerusalem, and watch the long triumphal procession, as it conveys the Ark of Jehovah, the Palladium of Israel, to its victorious resting-place in the city of King David.

As for King Saul, who can forbear to lament the wreck of that goodly person, that heroic, perverted, unhappy soul? For he has perished by his own hand on the field of a defeat which he was too weak to avert, and too proud to endure.[2]

Jonathan, also, the heir to the throne, has fallen with

[1] Tennyson, *The Dying Swan.*

[2] 1 Chron. x. 1–7.

his father; and David, with generous love, has sung the hymn of mourning for his unkind king and his loyal friend.[1] The thin, phantasmal glimmer of royalty which hovered for a few months about the head of Prince Ishbosheth on the other side of Jordan has disappeared like a will-o'-the-wisp. The warriors who followed the house of Saul have been lost in the gulf of death, like the brave Abner,[2] or have renounced their allegiance, like the treacherous sons of Rimmon.[3] The star of David, shining above the little city of Hebron, has waxed larger and stronger with every month. One by one the tribes of Israel have been drawn to the brightness of its rising, and have come to pay their fealty and offer their service to the man whom God had chosen.[4] He has been solemnly anointed king by the elders. The priests of the house of Aaron have given in their adherence. The little company which followed his fortunes in exile has grown into "a great host, like the host of God."[5] His nephews, Joab and Abishai, the fierce sons of Zeruiah, have proved themselves mighty men of war and skilful leaders of his armies. Step by step the Philistines have retreated before them, fighting in vain against the weapons of destiny, until at length, after seven years of warfare, they have been driven into their last stronghold, and David himself has come with his men to besiege the proud city of Jebus on Mount Zion.[6] The Jebusites have laughed at him from their lofty walls, boasting that they could hold this fortress with a garrison of the blind and the

[1] 2 Sam. i. 17–27. [2] 2 Sam. iii. 17–30. [3] 2 Sam. iv. 5–12.
[4] 2 Sam. v. 1. [5] 1 Chron. xii. 22. [6] 1 Sam. v. 6.

lame. But Joab has scaled the frowning cliff,[1] even as Wolfe in later days scaled the Heights of Abraham with his English soldiers; the defiant garrison has fled in dismay; Jerusalem has become the city of David; God has set his king upon the holy hill of Zion.

Vainly have his enemies gathered their forces and dashed themselves against his dominion. Twice the great flood of heathendom has lifted itself, like a wave crested with foam, and rolled towards his throne; twice it has rolled back again, broken and shattered, as an ocean-billow is shattered by the rocks and withdraws itself in a hundred streaming rivulets of defeat.[2] The idols have been overthrown and destroyed even to the borders of the land. Hiram, king of Tyre, has sent his messengers of friendship and tribute to his brother David.[3] The despised outlaw has become a mighty monarch. The calamities that threatened are overpast. They have vanished as the morning clouds are scoffed away by the mid-day sun. The throne of David is firmly established on the promise of God.

And now what is the first thought of this man who has advanced so steadily and bravely to the pinnacle, not of his own ambition, but of the Divine purpose towards him and his people? It is the memory of the Ark of the Lord, that sacred symbol of his religion, which his own eyes had never seen, but which his forefathers had followed in their desert wanderings, and which he desired at once to restore to its true position as the central point, the very heart, of the nation's love and loyalty.

[1] 1 Chron. xi. 6. [2] 1 Chron. xiv. 8–17. [3] 1 Sam. v. 11, 12.

The history of that consecrated chest of locust-wood, overlaid with gold, and crowned with the mystic figures of the cherubim, bending their wings above the mercy-seat,[1] — that divinely-appointed casket for the stone tables of the law which were the foundation-stones of the Jewish faith, — had been full of strange vicissitudes. It had been carried in triumph by the priests around the walls of Jericho while they were tottering to their downfall.[2] It had dwelt in the tents of the invading Israelites during the bloody wars of Joshua and the Judges, as their pledge of victory and their oracle of counsel.[3] It had been borne out to battle by the degenerate sons of Eli on the fatal field of Ebenezer, and had been captured by the Philistines. It had been set up as a trophy in the temple of Dagon at Ashdod, and the fish-god had tumbled down before it in ruinous dismay.[4] It had been sent, with marvellous and ludicrous celerity, from place to place among its heathen captors, bringing pestilence and disaster wherever it came, so that at last the people began to cry out in terror, "Here comes that dreadful Ark of Israel. Who shall deliver us from this deadly trophy?"[5] It had been returned with costly gifts by the five Philistine lords, who were glad to get rid of it at any price.[6] It had been welcomed with rejoicing by the men of Bethshemesh, who could not restrain their pious curiosity from peeping into it, and were straightway punished with death. At last it found a home in the house of Abinadab at the little village of Kirjath-

[1] Ex. xxxvii. 1–9. [2] Josh. vi. 6–11. [3] 1 Sam. iv. 4–11.
[4] 1 Sam. v. 1–5. [5] Ibid. 6–12. [6] 1 Sam. vi.

Jearim, on the borders of Israel. There it remained for nearly seventy years, carried out, it may be, occasionally among the people, but for the most part neglected and forgotten, for the people "sought not unto it in the days of Saul."[1]

But one man remembered it, and the glories of its history, and the significance of its symbolism. One man longed to see it brought out from its hiding-place and enshrined in lofty security as the jewel of the land. That man was the shepherd whom God had anointed and crowned. And it seems to me that this fact alone is enough to prove David's fitness for the high position to which he had been called.

It is the mark of true greatness to reverence the sacred relics of the past. It is the mark of sublime genius to seize upon a great religious idea and hold it up before the people so that all the scattered forces of national love and pride and hope may centre upon it. This is what David did. We may read in the one hundred and thirty-second Psalm how the idea came to him and laid hold upon him. It was at Ephratah, in the neighborhood of Bethlehem, that he heard of it. Immediately it took possession of his mind, robbing him of his rest in the night-watches. "And he sware unto the Lord, Surely I will not come into the tabernacle of my house, nor go up into my bed: I will not give sleep to mine eyes, or slumber to mine eyelids; until I find out a place for the Lord, a Tabernacle for the mighty one of Jacob."

It was a noble resolve; and now at last it had

[1] 1 Chron. xiii. 3.

become possible to put it in execution. The kingdom was consolidated. The stronghold was conquered. The Lord's place was found. So the resolute king, moving like a star towards his purpose, calls a great assembly of the people, and sets out at the head of thirty thousand men to bring the Ark to its home.[1] They take it from the house where it has lain so long in obscurity among the border forests, and put it upon a new cart, drawn by oxen, and escort it with music towards Jerusalem. But before they arrive at their destination an accident interrupts the procession. The oxen stumble on the rocky road, the Ark seems about to fall. Uzzah, one of the drivers, puts forth his hand rashly to steady it. But his temerity is punished by instant death, and the scene of joy is changed to one of mourning and terror. Even David is afraid when he sees how awful is the sacredness of this shrine, and he cries, "How shall the Ark of the Lord come unto me?" So the inauguration is postponed, and the Ark is hastily deposited in the house of Obed-edom, until God shall manifest His pleasure in regard to it.

It may have been that this check, this rebuke, was needed. It may have been that even David had come to think more of the successful accomplishment of his design than of the sanctity of this great religious relic, and to exalt the triumph of his own strong will above the fulfilment of the Divine purpose. Often does it happen that a man who is engaged in the noblest work needs to be reminded that the cause for which he is labouring is holier than himself.

[1] 2 Sam. vi.

But the delay was not for long. When three months had passed, David was told that a great blessing had come upon the house of Obed-edom. This he rightly interpreted as an omen of favour; and once more he comes forth to complete his design. And we cannot help observing how much more orderly and reverent the second procession is than the one which had been interrupted. This time there is no cart and no stumbling oxen, but the Ark is lifted high upon the shoulders of the Levites as Moses had commanded.[1] Well-ordered choirs of tuneful men surround it with their songs. The trumpets blow, the cymbals clash, the people shout, the long train winds up the mountain road, "sounding aloud with psalteries and harps." In front marches the king himself, clad in a short garment of white linen, more simply than the simplest of the people.[2] And as he goes he plays upon his harp and dances with all his might before the Lord.

Michal looks out from her window, — proud, foolish Princess Michal, — and her lip curls with scorn as she sees her husband so carried away with gladness. She is too conservative, too eminently respectable, to countenance enthusiasm even in the service of religion. But a great joy despises a petty criticism. Michal, like so many faultfinders, condemns only herself. She belongs to the jealous past: she is obsolete, deserted, left behind;[3] and the great procession of the new era sweeps triumphantly onward, with David at its head, forgetful of himself, of his many victories, of his royal state, singing only of the royalty and the victory of his Almighty Lord.

[1] 1 Chron. xv. 15. [2] Ibid. v. 28. [3] 2 Sam. vi. 23.

Thus the church marches onward through the ages, in despite of sour critics, oblivious of worldly contempt, fulfilling her destiny, and celebrating the triumphs of her King with holy exultation.

Let us listen, now, to the song which David composed for this occasion, which has well been called "the greatest day of his life." [1]

It was evidently intended to be sung chorally and antiphonally,[2] — voices questioning and replying, the strophe followed by the antistrophe, the instruments filling up the solemn intervals; and the simple, yet perfect, art of its construction serves to remind us that no music is too good for the worship of God, and no reverent care is to be neglected in ordering and beautifying the services of religion.

The psalm divides itself into three parts.

1. The first two verses are the introduction, and they were probably chanted by the whole company in a grand, solemn chorus. It would require rich and noble chords to carry the full meaning of these words:

> "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof:
> "The world and they that dwell therein."

How generously this opening phrase sweeps out beyond the narrow limits of race and nationality to include every living creature in the jubilation of that day! The false conception of the Hebrew religion was always trying to confine its joys and blessings to a strict line of natural descent; as if the favour of God were entailed, and none could boast of it save those who had

[1] Stanley, *History of the Jewish Church*, vol. ii. p. 94.

[2] Josephus says that seven choirs preceded the Ark on this occasion.

Abraham to their father. This was the keynote of that bigoted Pharisaic theology against which Jesus Christ clashed when He came to proclaim the broader Fatherhood of God. It was this perverted idea which made the scribes and lawyers rave, when He said that there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elisha, but unto none of them was he sent, but only to the widow of pagan Sarepta; and there were many lepers in Israel, but none of them was healed save Naaman the Syrian.[1] This seemed to them the rankest heresy. But indeed it was the same truth which had been declared to Adam, and again to Abraham in whose seed all nations should be blessed, and again to Moses when God said, "All the earth is mine," and again by David and his people when they sung of the world-wide dominion of Jehovah, — the same truth which was stated by Peter when he declared, "In every nation he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him." [2]

The thin lines that divide men into classes and tribes and churches vanish in the light of this truth. Jerusalem is the chosen city of God, but it is chosen to be the joy of the whole earth.[3] The holy streams that rise on Zion are to flow into every valley and water every plain. The Messiah is the glory of His people Israel, but He is also a light to lighten the Gentiles.[4] Religion is for humanity. The church is for the world. Her mission will be fulfilled, not when she separates herself in lonely rapture from the doom of the race,

[1] St. Luke iv. 25, 27.
[2] Acts x. 35.
[3] Ps. xlviii. 2.
[4] St. Luke ii. 32.

and rises into a remote and selfish heaven, but when she draws the whole world with her into the light of God, and the knowledge of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea.[1]

Even the lower creation of things inanimate and irrational shall have a share in this redemption. There is no mountain that shall not rejoice in the inauguration of that kingdom, no forest that shall not clap its hands, no flower that shall not bloom more brightly, no bird that shall not sing more sweetly when the round globe confesses that

"Jehovah is the sovereign Lord, the universal king."

This is what David meant by the broad chords of his prelude. There was no selfish and exclusive joy in that day of triumph when the Mercy-Seat came home to Zion. It was a fountain of gladness to the whole creation.

2. The second part of the psalm includes from the third to the sixth verse. The procession has now come, we may suppose, to the beginning of the actual ascent to the city. The people halt, and a single voice rings out in clear tones the searching question: —

"Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?
"And who shall stand in his holy place?"

A moment's pause, — and then the choir of singers responds with that lofty definition of the man of God which is worthy to be written in letters of gold, not only above the door of every church, but also on the walls of every capitol, and over the seat of every ruler, and upon the threshold of every mart of commerce, and

[1] Is. xi. 9; Hab. ii. 14.

within the home of every citizen. Clean hands and a pure heart, a soul that is turned away from vanity and a tongue that abhors deceit, — what words could describe more tersely and luminously the character after which every true man and woman ought to strive, the character without which we can never hope to become acceptable to God ?

There are some commentators who read these words as a prophetic description of the holiness of Christ.[1] But it seems to me that this robs them of all their point and meaning. For David is now declaring the principles on which he means to found his kingdom, the virtues which he intends to hold up continually before himself and before his people, and which are to be maintained by punishing and casting out the wicked, by rewarding and exalting the righteous.[2] No true kingdom can be established on any other foundations. No true religion can exist without personal holiness. It is not enough to trust in the perfect righteousness of Christ. Faith without works is a corpse. The world will bury or burn it. God will never inquire what has become of it in the day of judgment, but He will "render unto every man according to his deeds."[3] The world could not stand for a day if this were not true, and if men did not in their secret hearts believe it. It is this conviction that gives to the state the power of the sword as a terror to evil-doers, and to the church the power of the keys to admit and to exclude men according to the testimony of their lives.

[1] So Bellarmine and others. [2] Compare Ps. ci.
[3] St. Matt. xvi. 27.

An honest, earnest, true heart; a hand that will not stain itself with unjust gain, or hold an unequal balance, or sign a deceitful letter, or draw an unfair contract; a tongue that will not twist itself to a falsehood or take up an evil report; a soul that points as true as a compass to the highest ideal of manhood or womanhood, — these are the marks and qualities of God's people everywhere. And when these qualities are exalted and manifested, when a Christian means one whose word is his bond, who can be trusted with untold treasure without fear of his stealing, whose praise is an honour and whose friendship is a jewel of priceless value; one who does his duty towards his fellow-men as a service to his God; one whom you can more certainly trust to paint your house, or make your clothes, or draw your will, or take care of the health of your family, because he is a Christian; one whose outward integrity is the proof of inward purity, — then the church will have great praise and large triumph.

This is the character, our psalm declares, that "shall receive the blessing from Jehovah, and righteousness from the God of his salvation." For after all it is the heart in which this high ideal has formed itself, it is the life which is most earnestly striving to realize it, that feels most deeply its own imperfection and the need of a Divine salvation.[1] The effort after holiness always intensifies the consciousness of sin. The purest

[1] "It is the righteousness of God after which the righteous, but not the self-righteous, man hungers and thirsts; that moral perfection which is the likeness of God, restored to him, and at the same time brought about by his own endeavor." Delitzsch, *in loc.*

souls are those who cling most closely to God as their Redeemer and Helper. The doctrine of the forgiveness of sins and good hope through grace is most precious to those who are climbing upward, with painful steps, to seek the face of God.

3. The third part of the psalm includes the last four verses, and describes the actual entrance of the Ark into the city, and its installation in the tabernacle which had been prepared for it.

At the ancient gateway of the fortress-city the procession halts, and the chorus summons the everlasting doors to open and admit the King of glory. A voice from within, ringing forth like the cry of a faithful sentinel, asks, "Who is this King of glory?" Like the rush of a mighty river comes the answer, "The Lord of Hosts, he is the King of glory." And as if the music were a veritable flood sweeping all things before it, the Ark is lifted upward and onward, until it rests at last in its appointed place.

The new era is inaugurated. The wandering faith has found its home. The Mercy-Seat is established in the midst of the people. Jehovah Sabaoth, the Lord of Hosts, has fixed His dwelling-place in Zion. He is not merely the God of the pilgrim and the stranger, the object of personal faith and devotion. He is the centre of a great organization, an embattled army. The nation and the church, loyalty and religion, communal obligation and orderly worship, freedom and empire, were proclaimed on the authority of God, when David stood before the doors of the new Tabernacle

and blessed the people in the name of the Lord of Hosts.[1]

Homeward they turned from their great festivity. The splendid music died away. The throngs dispersed. But every soul of Israel was bound by a new allegiance to God and to the nation; even as we are bound by our allegiance to Him who has gone up on high leading captivity captive, before whom the everlasting gates of heaven have opened, and who is now enthroned as King of glory and Lord of the great host of believing souls.

[1] "The Greek rendering of this word by the magnificent *Pantocrator*, 'all-conqueror,' passed through the Apocalypse into Eastern Christendom, and is still the fixed designation by which in Byzantine churches the Redeemer is represented in His aspect of the Mighty Ruler of Mankind." Stanley, *History of the Jewish Church*, vol. ii. p. 96.

VI

THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

Psalm LI

THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

THE story of this psalm is more strange and shameful than any other narrative on the page of history. Not because the crime which it records is one without a parallel; for many an Eastern monarch has been guilty of transgressions no less flagrant against the laws of purity and honour. Lust and treachery and murder have joined hands in a royal sin many a time before the days of David, — and since. But the peculiar shame and surprise of this story lie in the black contrast between the previous life and character of David and his action on this particular occasion. It is like the sudden opening of a dark and filthy chasm in the midst of a fair landscape. It is the story of a fall, swift and horrible, from the heights to the depths, from the holy hill of God into the very abyss of Satan.[1]

[1] In favour of the Davidic authorship of the psalm we find (1) the ancient tradition; (2) the close resemblance of the style to that of the psalms which are universally acknowledged to be his; (3) the fervour of spirit and the unity of thought; (4) the fact that there is no other person described in the Old Testament to whose known history it can be applied, no one else of whom it can be said "that he was a devout man before and after his fall, that his sin involved the guilt of blood, that it was unpunished by the law, and that he was restored to Divine favor."

For surely, as we trace the career of David from the time when he kept the sheep among the lonely hills down to that afternoon when he went up to take his siesta upon the roof of his splendid palace, we must feel that he had been, in the main, a strong and generous and noble man. He had his faults, undoubtedly, like all who are mortal; but they were not the faults of meanness, of treachery, of cunning selfishness, of unbridled appetite. He had been well trained in the school of hardship and self-restraint. He had maintained the integrity of his character through many temptations, so that he was entitled to say in his psalms that he had walked in innocence and uprightness before the Lord.[1] God had confirmed him in a righteous life by prosperity as well as by adversity. He had bestowed the largest rewards of fidelity upon the man whom He had chosen, raising him to the summit of power and wealth and fame, crowning his arms with victory and his kingdom with success, giving him a thousand blessings as arguments and safeguards to keep him in the right way. If any man ever occupied a position of moral security, if any man ever had strong reasons for being good, it was David when he slept on that bright day of early summer, upon the terrace of his happy house. And yet, — he awakes; he sees a beautiful woman; he plunges suddenly into darkness and disgrace.

What does it mean? Just this: that our human nature is unutterably wayward and perverse; that there is a traitor within the citadel of the soul; that gravity

[1] Ps. xxvi. 1, 6.

and depravity are forever pulling all things downward, so that everything which God does not uphold must fall; that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

"Lord, with what care hast thou begirt us round.

. . . . . .

Blessings beforehand, ties of gratefulness,
The sound of glory ringing in our ears;
Without, our shame; within, our consciences;
Angels and grace, eternal hopes and fears.
Yet all these fences and their whole array
One cunning bosom sin blows clean away." [1]

It will not be necessary for us to rehearse the wretched tale of David's moral downfall. The Bible tells it, not like our modern chroniclers of crime who seem to gloat over the most repulsive details, but with swift, stern simplicity of speech, leaving the figures of the unsuspecting, loyal-hearted soldier, and his ambitious, cold-hearted, compliant hypocrite of a wife, and his perfidious self-dishonored king, to make their own impression and teach their own lesson.[2]

But there are two things which may have escaped our notice because they do not lie on the surface of the narrative, and to which our attention may be called with profit. First: the fact that David's sin did not at once bring any outward punishment or disgrace. It was apparently unnoticed by the world. The Book of Chronicles does not even mention it. The people knew nothing of any shadow that had fallen upon their king. His dominion was still prosperous, his arms victorious. The siege of Rabbah was successful,[3] and no one but the

[1] George Herbert's *Poems*, "Sin." [2] 2 Sam. xi.
[3] 2 Sam. xii. 26, 29.

cruel and silent Joab knew the king's guilty secret and the real history of Uriah's death under the walls of that foreign city which David went forth to occupy in royal triumph. Second: the fact that the king gave no sign that he was conscious of his own fall. Sin blinded his eyes and hardened his heart. He brought the beautiful, conscienceless Bathsheba home to his palace with every appearance of propriety and satisfaction. He enjoyed the fruits of his evil deed with none to molest or make him afraid. To all appearances he had no sense of his sin or of his dishonour. For observe how he receives the prophet Nathan, a year after the offence has been committed;[1] how he listens without compunction to the story of the ewe lamb which the rich man stole from his poor neighbour; how he breaks out with his old fine spirit against the man who has been guilty of so great a baseness and swears that such a fellow is unworthy to live. He does not recognize his own sin when it looks him in the face. He does not even dream that this pitiful story of the prophet is just a picture of his own cruel and mean conduct.

Then, like a flash of lightning, comes that daring word of Nathan: "Thou art the man." Then David's eyes are opened and he knows what he has done. In the clear, cold light of conscience he stands self-convicted and self-condemned. His sin has found him out and he must bear its punishment; though all the world should acquit and justify him, he cannot escape the consequences of his evil deed, the stain upon his honour,

[1] 2 Sam. xii. 1–6.

the sickness and shame and disaster which must fall upon his house; worst of all, he cannot escape the evil deed itself, which stands within his soul like a loathsome fiend, now unmasked, and visible in all its deformity.

"I have sinned; that is the bitterness of it all. What does it matter what happens to me, good or evil? Nothing can change the fact that I have sinned against light and privilege; sinned against the man who trusted me and died for me; sinned against the creature whom I loved and degraded; sinned against my own household and the helpless babe; sinned against my throne and my people; — nay, what are all these things? They seem like nothing when I remember that I have sinned against the Lord who loved me, and blessed me above measure, and gave me everything. Am I separated from Him forever? Does He hate and despise me? Is there no way to win back His favour and forgiveness? I will arise and go to my Father, and I will say to Him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight.'"

Thus the parable of the prodigal son is enacted in real life a thousand years before Christ put it into words of imperishable beauty and power. Thus we hear the prayer of penitence rising from the lips of the ancient Hebrew king, and our hearts tell us that it is our prayer as well as his; that it is just as true and fitting for us as if it had been written yesterday. Our actual transgressions, our particular offences against God and man, may be most unlike those of David, but our sin, our separation from the Divine will, our selfish-

ness, our uncleanness, are the same, and so our sorrow and our supplication must take the same form and flow in the same channel. "I am sure," said Dr. Thomas Chalmers, "that of all the psalms this one is the most applicable to me." The man who has never felt this, never made this psalm truly his own, has never known true repentance. Let us not study it in the spirit of cold, contemptuous criticism, looking down upon poor David from the pinnacle of our self-righteousness, and thanking God that we are not as he was; but let us kneel beside him, and thank God that since we are like him in our sinfulness, we can be like him also in his penitence, in his prayer, in his hope of pardon.[1]

There are several things in this psalm which we shall do well to notice and remember.

1. It begins with the mercy of God.

> "Have mercy upon me, O God,
> "According to thy loving-kindness;
> "According to the multitude of thy tender mercies."

Faith precedes repentance. Hope, not despair, is the mother of godly sorrow. The goodness of God is before the badness of man. The Divine forgiveness ante-

[1] "David, the Hebrew king, had fallen into sins enough; blackest crimes; there was no want of sins. And thereupon the unbelievers sneer and ask, Is this your man according to God's heart? The sneer, I must say, seems to me but a shallow one. What are faults, what are the outward details of a life, if the inner secret of it, remorse, temptations, true, often-baffled, never-ended struggle of it, be forgotten? 'It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.' Of all acts, is not, for a man, *repentance* the most divine? David's life and history, as written for us in these psalms of his, I consider to be the truest emblem ever given of a man's moral progress and warfare here below." — Carlyle, *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, Lect. II. p. 39.

dates the human sin. It is not until we see the light shining above us that we begin to loathe our dark estate and receive strength to rise out of the gloom and climb upwards. Tell men that God is inexorably just and they will tremble, and abhor themselves in dust and ashes, and lie still in sullen desperation or seek forgetfulness in the delirium of worse excess. But tell them that He is kind and gracious, waiting to forgive them; and then, if there is anything in them that can be saved, if there is a spark of true life not yet extinguished in the deadly atmosphere of sin, they will turn to their only hope and lay hold of the great mercy of God. It was the tender, compassionate look of Jesus that drew back the wandering disciple from his apostasy.[1] It is the sight of Calvary that melts the hardened heart. It is the love of God that saves sinners: not His righteousness, not His wrath, not His dreadful power, — but His long-suffering and boundless love. It was of this that David thought first when he repented; and thought of it now as he had never thought before. For now it was something more than the generous source of all his comforts and blessings, something more than the sun which had shone upon his prosperous career. It was the one star gleaming through the stormy night; it was the one refuge from endless shame and sorrow and death. Hitherto David had received all good things from that great love; but now he was driven to cast himself upon it, with the cry, "Lord save me, I perish." And surely, if the mystery of sin has any explanation, it is to be found

[1] St. Luke xxii. 61.

here, in the new meaning and value which it gives to the love of God. It transforms our treasure-house into our hiding-place.

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
"Let me hide *myself* in Thee!"

2. This psalm does not confine its confession to one particular offence. It speaks not of one sin, but of many. It seems to gather up all the tangled masses of evil (like some great knot of floating weeds and stagnant scum which you may draw to shore by any one of its interwoven fibres),[1] and cast it all down before God, praying,

"Blot out my transgressions."

It is true that there is almost always some one sin which presses itself with peculiar force upon our conscience, and seems more evil than the rest. But it does not grow alone, nor can it be uprooted without dragging with it a multitude of shoots and branches. It has sent its roots down into every part of our being, and bound itself with clinging tendrils to a thousand thoughts and feelings, and permeated our very nature with a network of poisonous life. There is no such thing as a single sin; nor can there be any such thing as a limited repentance. When we come to God with our confession, we must make it broader than the one offence which lies nearest to us, broader even than our knowledge of its secret connections.[2] It must cover the whole multitude of our transgressions. We must

[1] Alexander Maclaren, *The Life of David as reflected in his Psalms*, p. 218.

[2] Ps. xix. 12.

pray, "All that is wrong in me forgive; all that is evil, remove; all that is base, destroy."

3. The psalm makes every sin an offence against the personal God.

> "Against thee, thee only have I sinned,
> "And done that which is evil in thy sight."

David does not mean that he is free from all guilt towards men, that he has done no injury to the murdered Uriah, to his disgraced family, to the dishonoured and weakened kingdom. He means only that his guilt towards God is deeper and greater than all this. The black heart of his transgression is a sin against the purity, the justice, the love of God.[1] And this is the essence of all things evil, that they offend and wound the living, personal Spirit of Good. When we injure our neighbour we are harming a soul made in the Divine likeness; when we give way to our unholy passions we are taking part in the revolt of Satan against God; when we transgress one of the Divine commandments we are doing what we can to spoil the world which God made and loves, we are striking a blow at the very heart of our Father in heaven. Remember that His one great desire is to have all men and all things pure and good, reflecting His own holiness and happiness, and then you will understand the meaning of that strange saying of Christ, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto Me."

4. Observe also that David confesses that his sins are rooted in the very constitution of his nature.

[1] "Human judges can only regard wrong actions as *crimes*; God alone takes cognizance of them as *sins*." — *Perowne*.

"Behold, I was shapen in iniquity;
"And in sin did my mother conceive me." [1]

This is no mean evasion of his own responsibility, as if he would take refuge in the doctrine of total depravity and throw the blame of his evil doing upon his parents. He does not offer this as an excuse, but as a fuller acknowledgment of his guilt. It is as if he would say, "This unholy thing has been hiding in my heart from the beginning. My character, my disposition, my very manhood, is corrupt and full of sin." And truly, if anything could increase our unworthiness in God's sight, it would be just this fact that our worst temptations come from within ourselves, and we are driven into wrong not by any outward tempest so much as by the force of our own impure and selfish passions.[2] Never plead thine inherited nature as an extenuation of thine evil deeds. It is as base to love lying as it is to lie. It is as bad to have a murderous temper as it is to kill. It is the evil nature which God condemns. Make it not thy cloak for sin, but thy reason for penitence and thy strong plea for help.

5. The great desire of David's soul is not to be delivered from outward punishment, but to be purified from inward defilement. He can bear the consequences of sin, if he can only be saved from sin itself.

"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
"Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."

This is the true prayer of every soul that knows what sin is, — to be healed of its own hidden disease, to escape from its secret conflict and misery, to have

[1] Compare Job xiv. 4; Gen. viii. 21.

[2] St. Mark vii. 21.

truth and peace in the inward parts. If we can only obtain this spiritual healing and cleansing, it seems as if we should be able to bear anything that might come to us as the necessary result of our evil deeds. Pain, disgrace, disaster, even the literal pangs of fire, if there were such a thing in another world, we might endure. For an outward hell could not burn one whose heart had been cleansed, whose spirit had been renewed. Such a spirit would carry the water of life and the singing angels and the golden city and the eternal blessedness within itself, and there is not a corner of this wide universe where it could be really cast away from the presence of God. Let us not pray chiefly that God would let us into Heaven, but first that He would send Heaven into us.

"Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation,
"And uphold me with a free spirit."

6. And now, from this highest and noblest prayer, David's song springs up with a joyous and triumphant flight, as if his petition were already answered, as if his broken heart were renewed and the fountain of his music made pure and sweet. He declares the object to which he will devote his ransomed life:

"Then will I teach transgressors thy ways,
"And sinners shall be converted unto thee."

He describes the thank-offerings which he will present unto his Saviour:

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit.
"A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

He expresses the chief longing of his soul in an earnest request:

"Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion,
"Build thou the walls of Jerusalem." [1]

Does it seem strange to you that a prayer of penitence should end in a strain like this? It is indeed the most touching, the most wonderfully true and beautiful, thing in the whole psalm. It is as if David would say: "I will never forget my sin; my soul shall ever be humble and penitent before my God. But the very memory of His forgiveness will open my lips to a new and sweeter song of praise. My own experience shall teach me how to warn and help and comfort those who are going astray. And I will lose myself in the joy of God's house and in the growth of His kingdom." Philosophy of heaven! When shall our hearts enter into its divine sweetness? When shall we learn to make our dead selves the stepping-stones to higher things, and to bury our shame and sorrow in the gladness of work for God and man?

Leave thy confession there in the darkness before the mercy-seat. Bring thy contrition with thee, not as a heavy burden, but as an everlasting reminder of thy Saviour's pardoning love. And then make thy new life a happy sacrifice of thanksgiving upon the altar

[1] It has been urged that the last two verses of the psalm indicate that it was written in the time of the exile, when Jerusalem was desolate. But this objection may be answered by saying (1) that these verses may be regarded as a later addition to the original psalm, or (2) that the prayer "Build thou the walls of Jerusalem" is not out of place in the mouth of David, since the city was in need of defence and was not yet completely fortified. The latter seems to me the better explanation. And in this light the action of Solomon may be considered an answer to this prayer. (1 Kings iii. 1.)

of useful service. So shalt thou understand how all things, even our sins and sufferings, work together for good to them that love God, and the saying of St. Augustine is true: *Sunt quibus expedit cadere.*

VII

"MUSIC AND DANCING"

Psalm XXXII

"MUSIC AND DANCING"

THIS psalm follows close upon the fifty-first, even as the day follows the night, as forgiveness follows penitence, and peace follows forgiveness. It shows a smiling face after the tears have been wiped away. The prodigal has entered the Father's house, and now we hear "the sound of music and dancing."

There is no new story from the life of David to be connected with this psalm.[1] There are no outward events recorded in the history to mark his passage from the minor key of grief to the major key of gladness. The transition was spiritual and secret. There is an interval, a blank, an eloquent silence, which the reader must fill out of his own knowledge of the gracious dealings of God with His sinful and wayward creatures.

But if we wish to gather historical associations of some kind about the psalm, so as to make it more vivid and lifelike, we can easily find them. We may think of its words as they were chanted in the sonorous Hebrew tongue, year after year, century after century, at the

[1] Even Ewald concedes that David was its author; and what the great denier admits, no other critic will care to question. The word *Maschil*, which is prefixed to the psalm, means, probably, "a devout meditation."

close of the service on the Day of Atonement, gathering upon their wings the rejoicings of thousands and ten thousands of pardoned sinners, and bearing them upward from the great court of the Temple into the bright sky. We may think of St. Paul sitting in the house of Gaius in the busy city of Corinth and poring upon this psalm as a proof of the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins.[1] We may think of St. Augustine lying upon his sick-bed and reading the words of this psalm which he had written upon the opposite wall for his continual comfort and daily meditation. We may think of Galileo in his Roman prison repeating this psalm every week for three years,[2] — a task which his inquisitors doubtless imposed upon him for a penance, but which must have proved a consolation and an encouragement to his soul. We may think of Martin Luther expressing his conviction that this psalm was one of the four most precious in the whole book, "because," said he, "it teaches that the pardon of sin comes without the law and without works to the man who believes." And thus we can see David fulfilling his promise that if God would open his lips, his mouth should show forth the praise of his Redeemer. We can hear this song flowing down through the ages like an unfailing stream of help and refreshment, of which every man may drink, and yet it is not diminished but rather increased and filled with new sweetness.

[1] Rom. iv. 7, 8.

[2] When the Holy Inquisition cast him into prison for asserting the truth about the earth and the stars, he was ordered to repeat the seven Penitential Psalms every week as a part of his punishment.

1. Mark how it opens with a benediction. "*Blessed*," — the word in the original is not singular, but plural, as if to express the number and variety of the joys which the Psalmist has found. No one word is large enough to contain them; and so he multiplies the phrase by an unknown quantity, and cries,

"O the happinesses of him whose transgression is forgiven,
"Whose sin is covered;
"O the happinesses of the man to whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity,
"And in whose spirit there is no guile!"

An exclamation is often better than a description; a song is often more instructive than a sermon; and David could not have proved or explained the reality of his repentance in any other way so well as by this quick and joyous outburst of music. It is like the gleam of rosy light upon the western Alps; when we see it we know that the sun has risen. It is like an involuntary echo from the heart; when we hear it we know that God has spoken the word of peace. I had rather see a pardoned sinner show his happiness than hear him define his experience.

But though these verses are full of the freshness of natural emotion, they are not carelessly or thoughtlessly constructed. They are most wonderful in the wealth of their meaning and the exactness of their language. Here are three words to describe sin, and three words to describe forgiveness; and each one of them has its own peculiar significance and value, so that the unworthiness of man and the loving-kindness of God are fully exhibited and illuminated on all sides. Sin is

transgression,[1] an offence against God, a departure from Him, a defection from His covenant. Sin is a coming short of the mark,[2] a false step, a wandering from the path of duty. Sin is an iniquity,[3] an inward depravity or perversity, a crookedness of the soul which makes it like a bent sword or a deformed tree.

And when God pardons sin, He forgives it. He takes it away[4] as a burden is lifted from a weary back. He covers it,[5] He hides it out of sight beneath the mantle of His mercy. He imputes it not,[6] blotting it out from His book of account like a cancelled debt. So far as the relations between God and the sinner are concerned, that sin is destroyed, obliterated, gone forever. There is no more heavy weight to be carried, no more shame to be endured, no more fearful reckoning to be paid. The heavy-laden heart is lightened; the faulty and shrinking soul is clothed with fair garments; the debtor is released from his prison and his debt; the penitent's faith is accounted unto him for righteousness, and he walks forth a free man under the favour of God. Rest and cleanness and liberty, — these are the happinesses of the man who has sought and found the mercy of God. And surely the world holds none that can be compared to them.

But there is one condition to be fulfilled before a man can really enjoy these blessings. It is not enough that he should be pardoned; he must also have a spirit without guile. This does not mean that he must be

[1] V. 1, first clause.
[2] V. 1, second clause.
[3] V. 2, first clause.
[4] Cf. Ex. xxxiv. 7; St. John i. 29.
[5] Cf. Is. xxxviii. 17; xliv. 22.
[6] Cf. Rom. iv. 6–9.

like an angel in purity, for then the condition would be so hard that it would shut us all out. It means simply that the man who asks God's forgiveness must be sincere and true and candid, like that earnest disciple whom Christ saw under the fig-tree.[1] He must utter no falsehood either to himself or to his God. Conceal nothing, disguise nothing, extenuate nothing. Keep back no darling sin, hidden in the secret place of your heart. Make no false excuses. But come with an open and transparent soul, like a clear window through which the light of God may flow.

2. And now David shows us how needful is this absolute sincerity and straightforwardness in our intercourse with God, by recalling his own story. In a strain of sorrowful memory he describes the bitterness of the days when he was yet in his sins, unwilling to make a free confession and open his heart before the only One who could heal it.

> "While I kept silence, my bones waxed old
> "Through my roaring all the day long.
> "For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me:
> "My moisture was changed as with the drought of summer.
> "I acknowledged my sin unto thee,
> "And mine iniquity have I not hid:
> "I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord,
> "And thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin."

A sin concealed is like a hidden fire. It eats into the very life and consumes it with the weariness of old age. It "weighs upon the heart." It dries up the springs of innocent joy and peace, so that the whole existence becomes like a thirsty, tedious fever. There

[1] St. John i. 47.

is no relief in "roaring." All the complaints and murmurings, the outcries of disgust with life and the growlings of a sullen, discontented spirit, are in vain. Swear that "the times are out of joint;" swear at the world for a cheat; swear at yourself for a fool, — all this will bring no relief, no comfort. The disease (and that means the want of ease) is too deep for any remedy that you can devise. There is but one Physician who can heal it. You must bring it to Him, frankly, freely, with no reserve, and learn that an honest confession is good for the soul, and that God's mercy is great enough to blot out every sin except that which is hidden. No half-repentance can possibly succeed, and no full repentance can possibly fail.

3. "For this," says David, — for this readiness to meet the sincere and open heart with an instant forgiveness, —

> "Let every one that is godly pray unto thee
> "In a time when thou mayest be found."

What is this time, so precious and so rich in privilege? It is *to-day*, while the lamp of life holds out to burn, while the heart is still sensitive to the pain and shame of sin, while the desire of reconciliation and peace are still stirring within the soul. To-morrow may be too late; the soul may be dead and cold in sullen insensibility; the floods of evil may have drawn it so far down into their depths that no light is visible and no upward struggle is possible; it may be drifted to and fro like a log on the eddying currents, without desire or power to escape. But to-day there is still hope,

[1] Is. xlix. 8; lv. 6; Jer. xxix. 13.

because God is still in sight. It is the time of finding, and if any man will make it the time of seeking, —

> "Surely when the great waters overflow
> "They shall not reach unto him."

This is an image of security in the midst of danger, of peace in the midst of turmoil, of the centre of calm which scientists tell us is hidden at the heart of every cyclone. The man who has sought and found the mercy of God is not removed from the world of sudden floods and tempests, but he is like one whose feet are set upon a great rock, which cannot be moved or overwhelmed. He sees the waters hurrying past, but he himself stands firm, unshaken and unterrified. His confidence is not in himself, but in God. And he can sing with David, —

> "Thou art my hiding-place ; thou wilt preserve me from trouble.
> "Thou wilt compass me about with songs of deliverance."

There is a peculiar beauty in this last phrase. It suggests the picture of a company of singing angels joining hands about the son that was lost and is found, and making him the centre of a circle of joy. He is encompassed with songs; they are his guard, his defence. Music is like a wall round about him. Holy gladness is a secure protection to the soul. If any one is merry, let him sing psalms ;[1] and the little devils who are always waiting to spoil every pure enjoyment, and to make every pleasure an occasion to sin, will fly away, like bats from a cavern when a torch is kindled. Even the dangers which haunt the hour of disaster and loneliness, the temptations to doubt and murmuring

[1] James v. 13.

and despair, are dispelled when the heart begins to strike up a song of deliverance. Paul and Silas, sitting in the darkness of the Philippian prison,[1] were surrounded by their songs at midnight as by a circle of light, and the evil spirits had no power on them, dared not come near them.

4. But this sacred joy is not to be a mere emotion stirring upon the surface of the life. It is to come from the heart as well as from the lips ; it is to express a changed character, a new relation with God, a manner of life which sets itself in harmony with the Divine will as noble words to noble music. And so the psalm goes on to describe the way in which the returned prodigal will live in his Father's house. Here, in the eighth verse, the person of the speaker seems to change, and it is God who says, —

"I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go :
"I will counsel thee with mine eye upon thee.
"Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule, which have no understanding,
"Whose trappings must be bit and bridle to hold them in,
"Else they will not come near unto thee."

This is a kind and frank warning against that perversity of spirit, that wayward obstinacy, which so often brings us into trouble. It is a generous invitation to a life of gentle guidance and spontaneous obedience. God does not deal with all His children alike. He cannot, for they will not let Him. For those who are stubborn and self-willed, He must have the harness of restraint and correction. He must bridle them, lest they do harm in their rebellious folly. The govern-

[1] Acts xvi. 25.

ment of the world could not go on for a moment without strict laws and severe punishments for the wicked and headstrong.[1]

But God does not love this method best. He is as reluctant to use it as a wise parent is to punish a child. He desires all His creatures to submit themselves intelligently and cheerfully to Him; and then, for them, He has another method, a gracious and delightful guidance, an instruction of the heart, a sweet control of the spirit, which becomes at length so perfect that it does not even need a word or an explicit commandment, but expresses itself in a hint, a look, a glance of the eye. We sometimes see this beautiful relation existing between a wise mother and her child. There is no conflict, no harshness, no need of spoken explanation or reproof; correction, encouragement, direction, are conveyed by a tone of the voice, by an expression of the face, and received by a docile love which has grown into an instinct of subtle comprehension. You wonder how it is done. You wonder how the mother's wishes are anticipated and the child's character is moulded in sweet unconsciousness. It is the spirit of *sympathetic obedience;* and this is the spirit in which God wishes us to live with Him. The choice must be our own. He will deal with us as we deal with Him. There is no fact in human experience more certain than that

"Many sorrows shall be to the wicked;
"But he that trusteth in the Lord, mercy shall compass him about."

"He shall be surrounded with mercy — as one is

[1] Spurgeon says with quaint simplicity, "We should not be treated like mules if there was not so much of the ass about us."

surrounded by the air or by the sunlight. He shall find mercy and favour everywhere — at home, abroad; by day, by night; in society, in solitude; in sickness, in health; in life, in death; in time, in eternity. He shall walk in the midst of mercies; he shall die amidst mercies; he shall live in a better world in the midst of eternal mercies."[1]

5. The instruction of the psalm is ended. The way of a peaceful and happy life is explained. And now the music breaks out again in full tide, with a threefold note of joy:

"Be glad in the Lord,
"And rejoice, ye righteous;
"And shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart."

It is said that a friend once asked the great composer Haydn, why his church music was always so full of gladness. He answered, "I cannot make it otherwise. I write according to the thoughts I feel; when I think upon my God, my heart is so full of joy that the notes dance and leap from my pen; and since God has given me a cheerful heart, it will be pardoned me that I serve him with a cheerful spirit."

Pardoned? Nay, it will be praised and rewarded. For God looks with approval, and man turns with gratitude, to every one who shows by a cheerful life that religion is a blessing for this world and the next.

[1] Albert Barnes.

VIII

A PRAYER WITHOUT A PETITION

PSALM LXIII

A PRAYER WITHOUT A PETITION

THE title of this psalm tells us only that it was composed by David [1] when he was in the wilderness of Judah. This wilderness was the wild and desolate country lying to the eastward of Jerusalem and bordering upon the Jordan and the Dead Sea. There were two occasions when David was in this region. The first was in his youth, during his prolonged flight from the insane jealousy of Saul. But this could not have been the period at which the psalm was written, for it speaks of David, in the eleventh verse, as the king. The second occasion was in his old age, when he retreated from the unnatural fury of his own son, Absalom, who had rebelled against his father's authority and set himself upon his father's throne. This is the time to which the psalm probably belongs.[2] And in order that we may appreciate its peculiar beauty we must briefly trace the story of Absalom's revolt, the most bitter trouble of David's life.

[1] It has all the characteristics of his style: vigour, terseness, and rapidity of movement, unity of thought, and sublime simplicity of imagery. There are certain familiar phrases also, such as "the shadow of God's wings," which connect it with other psalms clearly belonging to David.

[2] 2 Sam. xv. 23, 28; xvii. 16.

His great sin against God, as we have already seen from the fifty-first and thirty-second psalms, had been abundantly pardoned. The burden of guilt, the sense of uncleanness, had been taken away from his soul. But the result of that sin in the history of the nation and of the royal house, God could not, or at least, in His infinite wisdom, God did not, avert. Transgressions may be forgiven, but their consequences must follow. The seeds of jealousy, confusion, and disaster had been sown in the family of David, and the harvest of shame and sorrow must be reaped. Dissensions and quarrels ripened thick and fast. The king's children disobeyed and disgraced him. His counsellors proved treacherous. His people grew cold and disloyal. His years were full of anxiety and distress. At last the troubles culminated in the conspiracy of Absalom.

This young man was by nature the most distinguished among the sons of David. He was celebrated throughout all Israel for his personal beauty.[1] He seems to have inherited from his father a high spirit and daring courage, as well as those magnetic qualities which enabled him to win admirers and followers wherever he went. His servants were his devoted soldiers; his friends were his blind partisans. He was generous, open-handed, a born leader of men. And the king's heart yearned towards him with all a father's pride and love.

But beneath this attractive exterior Absalom was haughty, fierce, and desperately ambitious. He was

[1] 2 Sam. xiv. 25.

like David outwardly, but inwardly he was fitted to become his father's most dangerous antagonist and deadly foe. For his strong will was indifferent to the restraints of religion, and his reckless courage was careless of the scruples of humanity. He had no respect for any law which opposed his wishes, and no reverence for any person who stood between him and the accomplishment of his purposes. His oldest brother had done him a great injury. For two years Absalom brooded over the wrong, and then he took the vengeance into his own hands and slew the offender.[1] This daring assertion of his implacable temper and uncontrollable self-will seems to have produced widespread consternation. The very presence of such a prince was regarded as a peril to the kingdom and the royal house. Absalom was forced to fly into exile in a foreign city, where he remained three years.[2] But the fond king still loved him and longed for his return. Through the mediation of Joab, the fugitive was brought back to Jerusalem, under the promise of pardon and safe-conduct.[3] But his father could not yet endure to look upon his face, and so he dwelt for two years in his own house in comparative disgrace. This seems to have preyed upon his proud spirit. He could not bear it any longer. Exile would have been more tolerable than this halfway restoration.[4] Finally he prevailed upon Joab to obtain an audience for him; and he came to the king and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king; and the king

[1] 2 Sam. xiii. 23–29.
[2] 2 Sam. xiii. 38.
[3] 2 Sam. xiv. 1–24.
[4] 2 Sam. xiv. 32.

kissed Absalom. So the reconciliation was complete, and the doting father was reunited to his favourite son.

But this reconciliation was the occasion of still greater troubles. For as soon as Absalom found himself reinstated in his princely dignity he began to assume royal airs. His elder brother was now out of the way. He considered himself as the rightful successor to the throne. He was determined to forestall the claims of Solomon, the son of Bathsheba, to anticipate destiny, and to make sure of the crown while it was within his reach. It would be easier to push aside his old father than it would be to dethrone his young brother, if the sceptre once fell into his hands. To a man like Absalom the considerations of filial duty and affection were trifles light as air. He never thought of them; or if he did, he dismissed them with contempt, and proceeded to carry out his lofty plans. He surrounded himself with a splendid retinue, knowing that the populace loves display. He moved abroad with chariots and horses and fifty footmen running before him.[1] At the same time he used all the ingratiating arts of the politician. He frequented the crowded gateway of the city, and conversed affably with everybody, and saluted strangers with condescending heartiness, and inquired after their affairs, and suggested that there was little chance of their getting justice under the present king, but if he, Absalom, only had the power they should all obtain their rights.[2] So, says the graphic historian, "Absalom stole the hearts of the

[1] 2 Sam. xv. 1.

[2] 2 Sam. xv. 2–6.

men of Israel;" and he cared little that it was his own father whom he was robbing.

When the time was ripe, when his party seemed strong enough for a successful revolution, he went down to the ancient city of Hebron, the former capital of Judah, and having prepared his friends by sending emissaries throughout the country, he set up the standard of revolt and proclaimed himself king.[1] The blare of his rebellious trumpets echoed from city to city. His admirers came flocking to his support. The secret dissatisfaction with David which must have been long smouldering among the men of Israel broke out into an open blaze. Those whom he had offended or injured, notably the great Ahithophel, once his wisest counsellor and most trusted friend,[2] the grandfather of Bathsheba, went over to the pretender. The conspiracy gathered head with marvellous rapidity.[3] David, sitting in sorrowful surprise and bitter dismay in his palace at Jerusalem, felt that his only safety lay in flight and concealment.[4] Hastily gathering his household and a few faithful friends about him, he went forth once more into exile, a fugitive now, not from the jealousy of his suspicious monarch, but from the unnatural and cruel ambition of his own darling son.

He would not suffer the Ark to go with him in his peril, but sent it back again into the city.[5] On foot, with no sign of royal dignity, surrounded by weeping followers, he passed down the steep road into the valley and across the brook Kidron. And as he

[1] 2 Sam. xv. 7–11. [2] Ps. xli. 9; lv. 12–14.
[3] 2 Sam. xv. 12. [4] 2 Sam. xv. 14. [5] Ibid. 25.

ascended the Mount of Olives he covered his head and wept,[1] for he was leaving the tabernacle of God and the city of his glory, his most trusted friend was a traitor, and the child of his love was seeking his life. Out into the wilderness he wandered, — the same wilderness which had sheltered him in his youth, — there to find a hiding-place until the trusty band of his followers should be strong enough to make a stand against his foes. And there it was that he wrote this sixty-third Psalm.

The most wonderful thing about it is that it does not contain a single petition. David is dethroned and beggared and outcast, but he asks for nothing. He does not find fault with God, or prefer an urgent request for restoration. He speaks almost as if he were still rich and prosperous and secure. He expresses the longing of his soul for God, the contentment of his heart in the Divine communion, the confidence of his faith that his enemies will be overthrown. But there is not one word of complaint or of importunity. He simply casts himself upon the Lord and waits patiently for Him.

There are four words which will give us the key to the psalm.

1. "O God, thou art my God."

This is a declaration of personal possession, we might almost say a claim of ownership, in the greatest Being in the universe. In the Hebrew there are but two words, — *Elohim Eli*. It is as if David would say, "O thou ever-awful One, thou belongest unto me; my one treasure, my strength, my life."

[1] 2 Sam. xv. 30.

There is no vanity, no self-assertion, in this claim. It is but the recognition of the truth which is clearly revealed in the Bible and most precious to the soul of man; the truth, namely, that God loveth altogether where He loves at all; that He does not give Himself partially but entirely; that He enters in all completeness into every heart that accepts Him, as if there were not another in the universe. Every one of His glorious attributes, all His thoughts of wisdom and feelings of infinite affection and purposes of eternal kindness become in a real and true sense the property of the individual believer. And even this does not exhaust the intimacy and perfection of the relationship; for the very personality of God, that living fountain of all His gifts and manifestations, belongs to each one of His children, so that the whole world might perish and yet the solitary soul could say,

"God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever." [1]

This is the true meaning of personal religion: not merely that the faith and love and hope of the believer proceed from a personal source within himself and are independent of all outward circumstances, but that they centre in a Personal Being, who has made us for Himself and bestows Himself upon us. And this truth finds its most perfect disclosure in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. For if David, who had never seen the Divine face, could learn to say in the sublimity of his confidence, "Thou art my God," how much more shall those who have beheld the Eternal Love embodied in a human form and offering Himself to death for their

[1] Ps. lxxiii. 26.

sakes, believe that God really and truly belongs to them. Every one that receives and trusts and follows Christ is entitled to call Him, "My Master, my Saviour, my Lord, and my God." And just as if your soul alone had been saved by the atonement of the cross, you can say with St. Paul, "The Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." [1]

2. "My soul thirsteth for thee."

Here David passes from the thought of his great possession to his present condition. He remembers the privileges of his intercourse with God in the sanctuary where he has gazed upon the symbols of the Divine power and glory, and been filled with joy and peace. From all these privileges he is now cut off. The Ark of God is far away from him. The Tabernacle which his hands had built for the Mercy-seat is in the power of his enemies. He cannot enter its beloved gates, or sing his psalms of praise with its precincts. He must dwell in a dry and weary land without water. The barren wastes of rock and sand through which he is journeying seem to him like pictures of his spiritual deprivations, and he cries with the simplicity of a child, "My father, I am very thirsty."

And is it not true, in spite of the fact that God is ours and goes with us wherever we go, that we sometimes come into a place where the familiar privileges of fellowship with Him are straitened, and the manifestations of his favour seem too scanty to supply our wants. Not to many of us has it happened to be entirely deprived of the outward ordinances of religion,

[1] Gal. ii. 20.

to dwell in a region where there was no church and no community of worship and no sweet service of Christian praise and prayer: but perhaps there are some of the readers of this book who have known what it is to be kept, by sickness, or infirmity of body, or the duty of caring for others who were helpless, for a long time from the house of God and the community of Christian worship. If the church has ever been a reality and a blessing to you, this enforced absence has given you pain and distress. You may have borne it patiently and without murmuring; but still it has been a real trial, and you have felt that deep thirstiness of spirit which David describes in his psalm. It is a mark of true religious life. For when a man can willingly forego even the outward services of religion, and stay away from the house of God, and let the seasons of devotion and communion pass by without a thought of regret, his faith and love must be at a low ebb, if indeed they have not altogether dried up and blown away. A living plant seeks water: a living soul longs for the refreshment of the sanctuary.

3. To those who understand the meaning of this thirst, the third part of the psalm comes as a gracious recompense and relief.

"Thy loving-kindness is better than life."

"It is true," says David, "that many of my comforts and blessings are taken away; but after all the best remains. For though Thy tabernacle is far distant, *Thou* art near, and the inward sense of Thy mercy satisfies and sustains my soul. In the night-watches I think of Thee, and happiness makes my hard bed a

couch of true rest. I do not miss the luxuries of my royal table, for Thou feedest me continually with better food. I do not miss the shelter of my palace, for Thy wings of protection are above me.[1] I can spare the hand-clasp of my former friend, yes, even the embrace of my darling son, for Thy right hand upholdeth me. What is all that I have lost, what is life itself, compared with thy loving-kindness?"

How secure is the man who can fall back upon such a reserve! How happy beyond all calamity, how rich beyond all failure, the believer who has such an alliance with the Almighty Friend of the soul!

4. The last part of the psalm seems to descend from this high level to a lower plane of feeling. It is a prophecy of disaster and punishment to David's enemies. It is summed up in the words,

> "The mouth of them that speak lies shall be stopped."

It may be that some readers will regret this change of tone and wish that these last three verses had been omitted. But let us remember that nothing else could have given us such a sense of actuality, of real human experience embodied in the psalm. These verses remind us most forcibly of the place where it was written,[2] of the king's peril and distress, of the relentless and unnatural foes by whom he was surrounded. And if we wonder that he could write the first verses under such circumstances, let us not be surprised that the sense of the treachery which had been used against him and the dangers into which he had been driven

[1] Cf. Ps. xvii. 8; xxxvi. 7; lvii. 1; lxi. 4.

[2] Note the allusion to the jackals which abounded in the wilderness.

finds its natural expression in these closing words. Remember also that he is not speaking now merely as a man, but as a prophet. He is not invoking curses upon his adversaries, but predicting their overthrow and the triumph of justice and right. Were not these predictions fulfilled in the suicide of the traitor Ahithophel,[1] in the death of the rebel Absalom,[2] in the scattering and destruction of the insurgent army? Over one at least of these unhappy criminals David wept with the bitter grief of personal regret;[3] but he could not help feeling that their punishment was necessary and just.

Nor ought we, as Christians, to feel otherwise. It is true that there are some expressions of indignation in the Psalms of David which we have no right to use. But as we stand beside our Master Christ, we must listen not only to His words of pity and pardon for the misguided, but also to His solemn denunciations of the incorrigibly wicked.[4] Our first desire and effort for all the enemies of our souls and all the rebels against God, should be for their conversion and salvation. But if they will not turn and repent, then we must be sure that in the end every mouth of falsehood shall be silenced. For truth and righteousness must prevail. The King must reign. All His foes must submit or be destroyed. Even though it must be won by the sword, God's universal empire shall be peace. Weep for the fallen. But rejoice in the victory.

[1] 2 Sam. xvii. 23. [2] 2 Sam. xviii. 9–15. [3] Ibid. v. 33.
[4] St. Matt. xxiii. 29–36; St. Luke x. 12–15.

IX

A ROYAL ODE

Psalm LXXII

A ROYAL ODE

THERE is little room for doubt that the author of this psalm, as the inscription says, was Solomon. It has a stately and splendid air, a tone of large magnificence, and at the same time the thought is more philosophical and artificial, less vivid and spontaneous, than in the poems of David. The imagery is drawn from the natural world, but it is reflective rather than pictorial, it has more of propriety than of originality. The movement of the language is formal and exact; the sentences are carefully balanced; it is the product not of a creative but of a constructive age; it belongs to the classical rather than to the romantic school; and the structure of the verse is in couplets, like the Book of Proverbs.[1]

But whether Solomon was its author or not, he was undoubtedly its subject, for there is none other among the kings of Israel to whom it can be applied with so much fitness. He was the most opulent, peaceful, and powerful of all the Hebrew monarchs. In his reign the glory of Jerusalem culminated.

At the same time we cannot help feeling that even Solomon, in all his glory, falls short of the full signifi-

[1] Delitzsch on the Psalms, vol. ii. p. 299.

cance of this psalm. He does not fill the outlines. There is something here which goes beyond all the outward splendour of the court at Jerusalem and exceeds the proudest triumphs of the Davidic dynasty. Behind these pictures of royal prosperity One greater than Solomon is standing, and as the dim, majestic figure of the ancient potentate fades away into the darkness of the past, we see the grander image of the Kingship of Jesus Christ shining out from the canvas and filling it completely.[1]

The Jewish interpreters have always seen in this psalm a prophecy of the Messiah, and the Christian church has read it in the same light and used it as the chief psalm for the festival of the Epiphany, which commemorates the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Now when we come to ask what right we have to do this, and how it is possible that the same poem should have been written to celebrate the glories of an actual monarch of Jerusalem and to foreshadow the greater glories of the coming Messiah, there are two things which it is important for us to embody in our answer.

In the first place, we must hold fast to the reality of the historical interpretation. The psalm is not an allegory, not a conscious and skilful adaptation of figurative language to the purposes of religious instruction. "They who will have this to be simply a prediction of the kingdom of Christ seem to twist the

[1] "In any other than the Christian sense it would be a specimen of more than Persian or Mogul hyperbole and bombast, of which there is no other instance in Scripture." — Coleridge.

words very violently."[1] The allusions to contemporary history and geography are very clear, and they must be interpreted in a straightforward way. It is plain that the writer was thinking first of the dominion of Solomon, its present splendours and its future triumphs.

But we must also remember, in the second place, that the psalm is undoubtedly a piece of typical literature. By this I mean that it stands in such relation to a history which was planned and directed by God with a continuous purpose of revelation, that its words are pregnant with a divine meaning, and find their complete fulfilment only when the revelation is completed in Christ. The promise of the Messiah runs like a thread of gold through the entire career of the Hebrew race.[2] This great hope planted itself in the very heart of the people. It throbbed passionately and persistently in the bravest of their warriors, the purest of their kings, the loftiest of their poets. It reflected light upon everything connected with it, — backward upon the patriarchs and heroes of the past, forward upon the monarchs and leaders of the future. It irradiated the Temple and its service with a supernal splendour, and made the holy city of Jerusalem seem the very centre of the world's expectation, and gave a sacred meaning to the sufferings of those who were persecuted by the enemies of Jehovah, and crowned the throne of David with the glory of an

[1] John Calvin, quoted by Perowne, *in loc.*

[2] "The central theme and the culmination of Hebrew prophecy is the Messianic ideal." — C. A. Briggs, *Messianic Prophecy*, p. 60.

everlasting promise.[1] When should He appear, — this mighty prophet, this perfect priest, this king beyond compare? Who could tell? It might be to-day, or to-morrow. Every gleam that brightened the national horizon might be the harbinger of His rising. Every song of triumph that sounded through Jerusalem might be the processional of His advent. Every new and successful monarch might be the Chosen One in whom the promise should be fulfilled. The hope was sure. He was coming, — coming to this people Israel, — coming along this line of David's house. And so the Hebrew poet, singing of the reign of the new king, is lifted above himself by the rising tide of a great anticipation, and his song takes upon itself the grander form of an unconscious prophecy, which becomes clear and luminous only when the light of the Gospel of the Son of God is kindled within it.[2]

He may not have comprehended — that ancient royal bard — all that he was saying. He may not have known that the true king of Israel was to be a Divine Person, for the twin stars of the coming of Jehovah to the earth and the rising of the Son of David to the throne of redemption had not yet joined their beams.[3] But the unconsciousness of the human

[1] 2 Sam. vii. 11–16.

[2] "As a transparency on some night of public rejoicing, seen by common day, with the lamps from within removed, even such would the Psalms be to me, uninterpreted by the Gospel."— Coleridge, quoted by Bishop Alexander, *Witness of the Psalms to Christ.*

[3] "The Old Testament, in relation to the Day of the New Testament, is Night. In this Night there rise, in opposite directions, two stars of Promise. The one describes its path from above downwards: it is the

author only enhances the value of the Divine inspiration. His song comes down to us like a strain of wordless music; beautiful, suggestive, vague; floating out from the lion-guarded throne at Jerusalem, and prolonging itself through the ages, until at last the perfect words have come to meet it in the life and character and reign of Jesus Christ.

He who first inspired the music is the same who afterward inspired the words, — the Great Spirit of Love, who kindled the hope of salvation in the human heart, and then fulfilled that hope in the gift of His own Son to be the Saviour of mankind.

In reading this psalm, then, our first thought will be of King Solomon, of whose successful reign it tells the story; but our second thought will go beyond this to the crown and kingdom of Him who is fitly called King of kings and Lord of lords.

Solomon, it has been said, is "in some respects the grandest and saddest figure in the sacred volume."[1] There is an air of mystery about him which cannot be penetrated. The opinions of men, in their final estimate of his character and reign, vibrate between high praise and severe condemnation. There never was a

promise of Jahve who is about to come. The other describes its path from below upwards: it is the prophecy of the Son of David, which, at the outset, assumes a thoroughly human and merely earthly character. These two stars meet at last, they blend together into one star; the Night vanishes and it is Day. This one star is Jesus Christ, Jahve and the Son of David in one person, the King of Israel and the Redeemer of the world, — in one word, the God-man." — Delitzsch on the Psalms, vol. ii. p. 300.

[1] Stanley, *Jewish Church*, vol. ii. p. 184.

king whose sun seemed to rise so clear and bright, and yet whose setting is obscured by clouds so dark and gloomy. The riddle of his history is inscrutable. But fortunately we are not required to read it, for we have to do only with the earlier portion of his reign and those features of it which were admirable and noble.

He was the second son of David and Bathsheba,[1] and after the death of his half-brothers Amnon and Absalom, his father designated him as the heir to the throne, confirming his promise to Bathsheba with a solemn oath that her son should reign. The attempt of the spoiled child Adonijah[2] to imitate the example of his brother Absalom, and frustrate the purpose of the king, made it necessary that David should be his own executor, and while he was still living, the young prince was mounted on the royal mule and led out to Gihon and anointed with all solemnity as his father's successor.[3] The trumpets sounded and all the people said, "God save King Solomon!" The servants of David came back to him in his sick-room to tell him that his desire was accomplished.[4] They saluted him, saying, "Thy God make the name of Solomon greater than thy name, and make his throne greater than thy throne." A strange greeting; but the old king welcomed it humbly and gratefully, bowing himself upon his bed, and answering, "Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel, which hath given one to sit on my throne this day, mine eyes even seeing it." David's long and

[1] The first died in infancy. 2 Sam. xii. 15–18.
[2] 1 Kings i. 5, 6. [3] Ibid. 32–39. [4] Ibid. 47, 48.

troubled life was spent. He felt that earth had nothing more to give him. His calamities were overpast, his wishes were accomplished. He died in peace upon his bed, and slept with his fathers in the little village of Bethlehem.[1]

But Solomon — young, happy, prosperous prince — had grasped the sceptre with a firm hand, and was well established in his father's seat. His enemies fell down before him. The foolish little rebellion of Adonijah vanished like a bank of mist when the sun strikes it. Abiathar and Joab and Shimei brought down destruction upon their own heads. The people of Israel turned with pride and devotion to their new ruler. The divine gift of wisdom descended upon him in great abundance.[2] He administered the affairs of the nation with skill and success. Wealth increased. His fame went abroad into other lands, and neighbouring kings acknowledged the superior splendour of his throne.[3] Israel enlarged her borders, and her monarch shone before the world like the noonday.

Now we cannot tell at what precise period of his reign this psalm was written, but we can easily see that it describes, in a broad way, the principles and qualities of his dominion, and alludes directly to certain incidents in his career. We may not call it a Coronation Ode, but certainly it is a Royal Psalm for Solomon the king.

Mark the tone of the opening section : —

> "Give the king thy judgments, O God,
> "And thy righteousness unto the king's son."

[1] 1 Kings ii. 10. [2] 1 Kings iv. 29–34. [3] Ibid. 21–28.

Here we have the dominant note of Solomon's reign, — the desire for extraordinary wisdom which should enable him to exercise his authority with perfect justice. And we cannot help turning in our thought to the story of that midnight vision at Gibeon, when the young ruler asked God for 'an understanding heart to judge the people and to discern between good and evil.' [1]

Following on to the next verse, —

> "He shall judge thy people with righteousness
> "And thy poor with judgment," —

we feel that it is almost a description of the famous episode of the two mothers who laid claim to the same child, and brought their case to the king for trial.[2] They were poor enough, both of them, — outcasts of the city, unworthy even to appear before the royal presence. But the wise Solomon gave as much thought and care to their claims as if they had been princesses, and by a most memorable exercise of judicial skill brought light out of the darkness, obtained testimony without witnesses, and rendered a decision which has become proverbial for its perfect equity.

Turn again to the sixth and seventh verses, —

> "He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass,
> "As showers that water the earth;
> "In his days shall the righteous flourish;
> "And abundance of peace till the moon be no more."

This reminds us of the great contrast between the character and methods of David's government and those of his son and successor. In David's time war was

[1] 1 Kings iii. 9. [2] Ibid. 16–28.

the rule and peace the exception. The kingdom triumphed, and grew with marvellous rapidity, but it was by means of violent efforts and fierce struggles with surrounding tribes. The sword was continually in David's hand: when he was not conquering his foreign enemies, he was putting down some civil insurrection. But the strength of Solomon lay in another direction. Statesmanship, the wise administration of internal affairs, a policy of alliance with other princes, — these were the chief means which he employed for the advancement of his dominion. In his days war was the exception and peace the rule.[1] There was abundance of it. His very name, corresponding to the German "Friedrich," means "the peaceful one;" and the influences of his throne, descending upon the people like gentle showers upon the meadow after it has been mown, caused the nation to flourish almost unconsciously, as if in obedience to the silent operation of natural laws.[2]

The vast extent of his dominion is described in the eighth verse. It stretched from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth. This does not profess to define the literal boundaries of Solomon's empire, but it shows us how it reached out its arms from the Mediterranean to the waters beyond the verge of Asia, and made its power felt from the banks of Euphrates unto regions which seemed to the Jews like the

[1] The two principal adversaries with whom Solomon had war were Hadad the Edomite and Rezon who had established himself as the chief of a band of brigands at Damascus. 1 Kings xi. 14–25.

[2] Compare David's words, 2 Sam. xxiii. 4.

ends of the earth. The tribes of the desert recognized his authority, and the gigantic foundations of Baalbec and Tadmor remain to this day as memorials of his wide and potent sway.[1]

The tenth verse reminds us of the far-reaching international and commercial relations which Solomon established.

> "The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents,
> "The kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts."

We see his navies sailing from the new seaport which he had built on the Red Sea, to visit the mysterious land of Ophir;[2] and again from the coast of the Mediterranean pushing out through the many islands to the distant shores of Spain,[3] and returning laden with gold and silver and ivory, aloes and cinnamon and cassia, apes and peacocks, and all manner of strange riches. We see the maritime monarchs and the rulers of secluded inland nations vying with each other in securing the friendship of Israel's king; Hiram of Tyre sending his rare woods and precious metals and skilled workmen for the adornment of the Temple;[4] and the renowned queen of Sheba coming in person to admire Solomon's wisdom and present her spicy treasures before his throne.[5]

Nor were the wealth and prosperity of the times confined to the royal household. The people rejoiced in overflowing harvests. It seemed as if the very seed which they scattered had a blessing on it.

[1] 2 Chron. viii. 4–8. [2] 1 Kings ix. 26–28. [3] 1 Kings x. 22.
[4] 1 Kings v. 1–11. [5] 1 Kings x. 1–13.

"There shall be an handful of corn upon the tops of the mountain;
"The fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon:
"And they of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth."

Town and country prospered alike. Flour and meat were plenty. The population increased. "Judah and Israel were many, as the sand which is by the sea in multitude, eating and drinking and making merry."[1]

Might not the closing words of the psalm be used with truth of a king so great and successful?

"His name shall endure forever;
"His name shall be continued as long as the sun:
"And men shall be blessed in him;
"All nations shall call him happy."

So the mighty Solomon may have thought, looking forward to the perpetuity of his fame and the everlasting continuance of his dynasty. But if he did thus centre his pride and hope upon himself he was deceived. The Spirit of God who spoke through him breathed into his words a vaster meaning than he could ever fill. No human name can boast itself coeval with the sun; for the glory declines, the shadow of oblivion sweeps over the greatest achievements, and the name at which the peoples once trembled becomes like a dream, a shadow, a ghost of power. No human king can claim the allegiance of all nations; for the universal empire crumbles almost as fast as it is built; the throne of Solomon was shaken while he lived, and when he died in the dishonour of his gray hairs, it fell in fragments of ruin. There is but one person in whom such prophecies as these find their adequate fulfilment, — but one person whose name grows sweeter

[1] 1 Kings iv. 20–25.

and more potent as the years roll by, — but one person whose dominion has been steadily increasing for eighteen centuries with the promise of a world-wide consummation, — and that person is the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Let the throne of the world be declared vacant tomorrow. No other name could be named that would not provoke angry competition. But when Jesus Christ is seated there, there is none that has dared to dispute his right."[1]

When we speak of the crown and kingdom of Christ, it is difficult to avoid falling into the language of metaphor, which sounds like exaggeration. For it is evident that the Man whom we exalt and before whom we bow the knee has never worn a literal diadem, save one of thorns; has never been formally proclaimed as the monarch of any province, except perhaps for the few months when the little city of Florence called Him king; and has not even established His spiritual dominion in such a form that we can trace its boundaries and measure its power; for the church in its outward organization is divided into sects and parties, many of them refusing to recognize each other, and the largest of them all making much more of the supremacy of the Pope than of the headship of Christ.

And yet it is true that He has a kingdom vaster and more glorious than any visible empire of the world; He has an influence larger and more potent than sceptred monarch or sworded conqueror has ever exercised. His kingdom is within. His influence is the power of

[1] W. Boyd Carpenter, *Witness of the Heart to Christ*, p. 32.

His teaching to control men's thoughts, the power of His example to direct men's lives, the power of His character to mould men's hearts into conformity to Himself. A silent influence, an unseen kingdom, so far as the means which He uses to advance it, and the laws by which He controls it, are concerned; but eloquent and visible in its results.

Do we behold the laws of nations becoming more just and firm and equitable, recognizing that their authority rests not upon the arbitrary will of sovereigns, but upon the deep foundation of eternal right, reaching out to cover not only the relations which exist between man and man, but also those wider relations which exist between races and peoples, and at least approximating the lofty ideal of

"The Parliament of man, the Federation of the world"?

It is the wisdom of King Jesus; teaching us to believe that God is our Father and all men are brothers.

Do we see the shapes of ancient wrong and oppression trembling and vanishing, or hiding themselves in dark corners, disguising themselves in borrowed garments, defending themselves with the craft and energy of despair? Do we see woman lifted from the dust and set in the place of household honour; and slavery banished from civilized lands, crouching like a hunted tiger in jungles and deserts; and poverty transformed from a badge of disgrace into an appeal for help; and the instruments of torture, the cross, the stake, the fagot, the rack, the knout, broken into fragments or preserved in museums as curious relics of a barbarous past? Do we see those who still love tyranny and practise cruelty

forced to conceal their purposes, and to defend their principles with desperate expedients, while they retreat with sullen steps before the incoming flood of light? Do we see Charity assuming a royal garb and Compassion exercising a princely generosity, hospitals and asylums rising like palaces, kings and queens bending beside the couches of the sick? It is the humanity of King Jesus, breaking the fetters from the heart of the world, sparing the poor and needy, and saving the souls of the needy.

Do we hear the voices of hope and cheer rising on every side and answering from land to land, proclaiming the promise of a better day in the future than any that have dawned in the past, prophesying through all discouragements and regrets that the course of mankind is not downward but upward, acknowledging that when all men are like Christ earth will be like heaven? It is the divinity of King Jesus, manifested in human flesh, real, living, and eternal, the hope, the joy, the glory of mankind.

If we have yielded our hearts to Him as monarch, we know the sweetness of His secret reign. If we have fixed our hearts on Him as God, we know the certainty of His open triumph. The day is coming when all shadows shall depart and light be everywhere. The day is coming when all rebellion shall cease and peace be everywhere. The day is coming when all sorrow shall vanish and joy be everywhere. The day is coming when all discord shall be silent, and angels leaning from the battlements of heaven shall hear but one word encircling earth with music: —

"All nations shall call him BLESSED."

X

THE CITY OF IMMANUEL

PSALM XLVI

THE CITY OF IMMANUEL

THIS psalm tells of the peace and security of the city of God in the midst of great perils, and describes its signal deliverance from the rage of the heathen. It has, therefore, been used by the Church in all ages to express her confidence in God against all foes and dangers. But this spiritual meaning will be greatly enhanced, the reality and power of the steadfast faith and grateful exultation expressed in these verses will impress us far more deeply, if we can trace them back to their point of contact with the real life of the Hebrew people, and bring before our minds the event in the history of Jerusalem which called forth this splendid hymn of trust and triumph.

It did not come out of the air; it was no vague poetic utterance of what the psalmist might have felt if certain things had happened. It was born out of the storm and stress of actual conflict, in a time when the forces of a dreadful foe seemed to be sweeping over the land like a new flood, threatening to shatter and submerge even the mountains; in a time when the wrath of many nations was swelling, and the kingdoms were moving and clashing together, and all human confidence was shaken, all human defence seemed vain;

then it was manifest that God is the strength of Zion, her very present help in trouble; then the dark and dreadful night was followed by a calm and glorious morning, in which the inhabitants of Jerusalem were summoned to come out from their beleaguered city and behold the work which Jehovah had wrought for them, the desolation which He had brought upon their enemies, the awful peace which He had made round about His holy Tabernacle. As we read the history of the chosen people we can see quite clearly that this time must have been during the great Assyrian invasion in the reign of Hezekiah, and this psalm, like the seventy-sixth and perhaps also the forty-seventh and forty-eighth, belongs to the wonderful story of the destruction of the army of Sennacherib.[1]

The interest of this story turns on the imminent peril and the strange deliverance of the city of Jerusalem. In order that we may understand it fully, it will be necessary for us to follow the fortunes of the city from the death of Solomon down to the time when this psalm was written.

While the mighty son of David lived, Jerusalem was the centre of all Israel; but when he fell, his kingdom, burdened with taxes, relaxed by luxury, and weakened by secret intrigues, fell with him and split into two great fragments.[2] The larger fragment, consisting of the ten northern tribes, renounced the authority of David's house, and set out upon an independent career as the kingdom of Israel. Its course was turbulent and bloody; and it closed, after two cen-

[1] 2 Kings xix. [2] 1 Kings xii. 1–20.

turies and a half of religious corruption and political confusion, in the utter annihilation of the kingdom. The lost tribes of Israel were swept from the face of the land as with the besom of destruction, and vanished forever from the knowledge of man.

But the smaller kingdom of Judah, which still remained faithful to the throne of David, had a longer and a less broken history. There seemed to be something which gave a greater compactness and pertinacity, a larger power of resistance and endurance, to this kingdom than belonged to its northern rival. For one thing it had the special promise of Divine favour; the prophecy that the sceptre should not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh should come.[1] And though the Jews may not have fully comprehended the meaning of that prediction, there can be no doubt that it strengthened their confidence and maintained their courage, and fastened their loyalty to the reigning house. For it was along the line of David's family that they looked for the coming glory, and upon his seed their hopes were fixed. This was doubtless a great safeguard to them against such internal revolutions and civil discords as desolated the kingdom of Israel, which was ruled within a period of two hundred and fifty years by no less than seven different dynasties.[2]

But another and still greater advantage which belonged to Judah was the possession of the sacred city. Although she had been shorn at one stroke of three

[1] Gen. xlix. 10.

[2] Jeroboam, Baasha, Omri, Jehu, Menahem, Pekah, Hoshea.

quarters of the territory which had once acknowledged her sway, Jerusalem was still by nature and by Divine appointment the queen-city. Her palaces and fortresses were the centre of national pride; her Temple, though often desecrated and despoiled, was the visible symbol of religious unity. Thrice was she captured and pillaged,[1] but she seemed to have an immortal life, and an exhaustless power of renewing her strength and beauty. The history of Jerusalem is in fact the history of Judah; and the test of greatness in the Jewish kings is to be found in their relation to the holy city and the Temple of Jehovah. Those who were base and wicked and incompetent, defiled the city with idolatries, enervated her with debauchery, stole her treasures to purchase peace from the heathen, or suffered her to become a prey to the spoiler. Those who were, at least by comparison, strong and brave and righteous, rebuilt her shattered walls, restored her former glories, cleansed and adorned her great Sanctuary, and defended her valiantly against her foes. Chief among these good kings were Asa, Jehoshaphat, and Uzziah; but perhaps the best of them all, the one who came nearest to the lofty ideal of the true ruler of Israel, was king Hezekiah.

His reign began amid the corruptions which had been introduced by his predecessors. The city was full of luxury, oppression, and disorder: the Temple

[1] First by Shishak, king of Egypt (2 Chron. xii. 9); then by the Philistines and Arabians, who harried the land in the days of Jehoram (2 Chron. xxi. 16, 17); then by Joash, king of Israel (2 Chron. xxv. 23, 24).

was defiled with the abominations of pagan worship. But Hezekiah, aroused and converted by the stern voice of the prophet Micah denouncing the wrath of God against these evils,[1] inaugurated a general reformation and a new order of things. He opened the great doors of the Sanctuary which had so long been closed, and cast out the filthiness from the holy place.[2] He broke in pieces the figure of the brazen serpent which had become an object of idolatrous worship, and overthrew the altars of false gods.[3] He renewed the beautiful worship of the Temple according to the commandment of David, and filled the courts once more with the music of sacred psalms.[4] He revived the celebration of the Passover, and caused it to be kept with a solemnity which had been unknown since the days of Joshua.[5] In all things he showed his reverence for the glorious past and his desire to win back the favour which God had once shown unto His chosen city. Nor did God refuse his service, for the Divine blessing was manifested upon the king, and it seemed as if a new era of prosperity and peace were dawning upon Mount Zion.[6]

But now, in the midst of all this joy and hope, a great danger loomed upon the horizon, and, swiftly as a storm-cloud, spread itself across the sky. The mighty and mysterious kingdom of Assyria, which had sprung up as if by magic in the region of the great rivers Euphrates and Tigris and swept down in its resistless march the kingdoms of Syria and Israel, began to

[1] Jer. xxvi. 18, 19. [2] 2 Chron. xxix. 3, 15, 16. [3] 2 Kings xviii. 4.
[4] 2 Chron. xxix. 30. [5] 2 Chron. xxx. 1–5. [6] Ibid. 20, 21.

threaten the kingdom of Judah. A new monarch reigned at Nineveh, — Sennacherib, whose name may still be read on the Assyrian tablets as "the great, the powerful king, . . . the favourite of the gods, the observer of sworn faith, the noble hero, the strong warrior, the first of kings, the punisher of unbelievers, the destroyer of wicked men." [1] The gigantic pride which is expressed in such a signature as this was not to be satisfied with any limits to its dominion. Sennacherib could not rest content until he had met and conquered the king of Egypt, the only rival who could oppose him on anything like equal terms. But right in his pathway lay the kingdom of Judah, small but strong, the last obstacle between him and his great ambition. This also must be swept away, must be either destroyed, or subjugated and rendered harmless, in order that he might continue his victorious march towards the Nile-palaces without leaving an enemy in his rear. And so we behold the fierce host of invaders, rushing down from the north, "their arrows sharp, their bows bent, their horses' hoofs like flint, and their chariots like a whirlwind," [2] roaring like the waves of the sea in the incredible swiftness of their march, overthrowing city after city, filling the land with sudden darkness, rushing onward like a flood to surround and submerge the mountain of Zion and the city of Jerusalem. At first Hezekiah was brave and refused to submit.[3] But at length his courage gave way and he paid tribute to the conqueror.[4] The record of his submission was written by

[1] Rawlinson, *Ancient Monarchies*, vol. ii. p. 456.
[2] Is. v. 26–30. [3] 2 Chron. xxxii. 1–8. [4] 2 Kings xviii. 14.

Sennacherib in Nineveh, and may be read to this day in the strange Assyrian characters. Thus it runs: "And because Hezekiah, king of Judah, would not submit to my yoke, I came up against him and by force of arms I took forty-six of his fenced cities . . . and carried off as spoils 200,150 people. . . . And Hezekiah himself, I shut up in Jerusalem, like a bird in a cage, building towers round the city to hem him in, and raising banks of earth against the gate to prevent his escape. Then upon this Hezekiah there fell the fear of the power of my arms, and he sent out to me the chiefs and the elders of Jerusalem with thirty talents of gold and eight hundred talents of silver and divers treasures and rich and immense booty. All these things were brought to me at Nineveh, Hezekiah having sent them by way of tribute, and as a token of submission to my power." [1]

But a purchased peace is never of long endurance, and this was not the way that God had appointed to deliver Jerusalem out of the hand of the Assyrians. Hezekiah soon repented of his surrender, displaced the counsellor who had advised him to this course, and asserted his independence against the invader.[2] Startled by the news that an alliance was proposed between Judah and Egypt, or perhaps seized with a desire to win yet greater spoils from the city which had already yielded him such abundant treasure, Sennacherib sent back a mighty army against Jerusalem under command of the Tartan or general of the host, to make an end of all resistance.[3]

[1] Rawlinson, vol. ii. p. 435.

[2] Is. xxii. 15–19; 2 Kings xvii. 17 ff.

[3] 2 Kings xix. 9 ff.

Insolently advancing to the very walls, and speaking in the Jews language so that all the people could understand, Sennacherib's heralds boasted of their master's terrible prowess, taunted Hezekiah with his helplessness, and summoned the city, with alternate threats of destruction and promises of mercy, to submit to its fate. It was a day of trouble and rebuke and blasphemy. Hezekiah rent his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord. He was ill bestead, knew not what should be done, was driven almost into despair. It was vain for the enfeebled garrison to think of resistance. There was no hope in man; he could only lay the matter before God, beseeching Him to rebuke the invader and turn back the destruction. Then came the prophet Isaiah, to tell the king that his prayer against Sennacherib had been heard. "Thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor cast a bank against it. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return. . . . For I will defend this city to save it for mine own sake and for my servant David's sake." [1]

Night descended upon the world, wrapping the beleaguered city and the invading host together in its impenetrable shadows. Little sleep was there in the houses of Jerusalem, where the people were trembling, praying, waiting for their deliverance: but in the camp of the Assyrians, confident of victory, dreaming perhaps of the morrow's plunder, there was sleep enough,

[1] 2 Kings xix. 32–34; Is. xxxiii. 20–24.

sleep sinking deeper and deeper into the silent gulfs, sleep prolonging itself far beyond the dawn, the motionless and dreamless sleep that knows no waking. For the wind of a mysterious pestilence passed over the encampment in the darkness and smote a hundred and eighty-five thousand men.[1] The bow was broken, the chariot was unyoked, the horse and his rider were still together. When the sun rose and looked upon the place where yesterday had been an irresistible army, what a sight was revealed!

"Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
"That host on the morrow lay withered and strown;
"For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
"And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed:

"And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
"And their hearts but once heaved and forever grew still!
"And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
"Though through it there rolled not the breath of his pride:

"And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
"The lances unlifted, the trumpets unblown;
"And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
"Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord." [2]

This is the story of the forty-sixth psalm. Read it again in the light of this history and see what a new and deep meaning shines from all its verses. What an accent of immediate confidence falls upon the words "a very present help in trouble." How the clash of arms and the murmur of a great host mingles with the roaring waters in the third verse. And how sweet and gentle is the flow of the river of peace within the city,

[1] 2 Kings xix. 35.

[2] Byron, *Hebrew Melodies.*

by contrast with that turbulent sea. How suddenly the voice of God pierces the tumult of His enemies. How deep and dreadful is the silence that follows. As we look upon the destruction which He has wrought, it seems as if every heart must pause and listen while He says: —

> "Be still and know that I am God;
> "I will be exalted among the nations,
> "I will be exalted in the earth."

But has this psalm no application to us in our daily trials and perils? Has it no connection with the present conflicts of the Church? Must we simply go back to Sennacherib and exhaust all its significance upon his downfall? Not so thought the people of Moscow, who made this psalm their memorial song of triumph for that night on which twenty thousand of Napoleon's horses perished by frost and the French army was driven back by an unseen hand into its disastrous retreat. Not so thought John Wesley, who preached from this psalm when an earthquake shock was felt in London in the last century. Not so thought good Martin Luther in the dark days of the Reformation, when he used to say to his friend Melanchthon, "Come, Philip, let us sing the forty-sixth psalm:"

> "Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott."

I wonder how often, in how many languages, in what strange regions of the earth, under what peculiar circumstances of peril and anxiety, this very thought has brought comfort and courage to the troubled soul. Against all enemies it holds good, for there is none so strong as God. Amid all dangers it holds true, for He is always near us and ready to help us.

"The Lord of Hosts is with us;
"The God of Jacob is our refuge."

This is the keyword of the psalm: the refrain which is twice repeated, as if to make sure of its remembrance. The Talmud says "that this verse should never depart from the mouth of an Israelite." And if we belong to the true children of Abraham, the followers of God in the spirit of faith, we also ought to bind it upon our hearts as a talisman of eternal security.

What does it mean? Surely something vastly more precious than the abstract truth of the Divine Omnipresence, the vague and mysterious doctrine of an infinite Deity whose formless essence fills all space. That is a philosophical theory, a theological dogma if you will; but I doubt whether it has ever brought comfort and strength to a human soul, whether it has ever entered into personal experience as one of the living realities of religion. The psalmist was thinking of something very different when he wrote this verse; and all true believers who have appropriated and repeated it have done so with a sense of its deeper and more intimate meaning. Not that God is everywhere, but that He is here; not that He is diffused, but that He is manifested in a special place and manner; not that He beholds and orders all things, but that His eyes are upon them that fear Him and His hand covers them continually.

God is present with His own people in a sense which belongs to them alone. He is present by the revelations of His glory. They have learned to see His face and hear His voice in the world, so that the stars,

which to other men are silent, speak of His wisdom to every faithful heart, and the sea tells of His power, and the fruits and flowers of earth seem to those who love Him as if they were offered by His bountiful hands.

He is present, also, by the operations of His grace. The motions of His Spirit within the heart are the source of all holy thoughts and desires. He answers in secret the prayers of those who seek Him, lifting them up above themselves, assuring them of the forgiveness of their sins, making His word shine for them with a significance which the unbeliever cannot know, filling the services of the Church and the exercises of private devotion with a reality which is the pledge and proof of His presence. It is like the touch of His hand, like the warmth of a great Heart beating against our own.

He is present, also, in the dealings of His providence. If we trust Him, He is guiding us by His counsel, He is defending us by His might, He is interposing to rescue us from our enemies. We are like ships sailing under the convoy of an invisible fleet; like pilgrims marching with an escort of countless armies; like a city guarded by unseen hosts of angels. God is not only *on* the side of His church and His people: He is *at* their side. He goes with them as the pillar of cloud and fire went with the children of Israel. Therefore they can always say with Paul, confident of deliverance and victory, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" [1]

[1] Rom. viii. 31.

Now we surely can see that this is true of the Church at large; we can trace the history of her preservation in the midst of perils and persecutions, and recognize in her survival and triumph over all foes the continuance of that miraculous interposition which God displayed in behalf of Jerusalem against the army of Sennacherib. But in regard to the individual Christian it often seems more difficult to discern and to believe the truth. Why is it that a man who trusts in God is ever killed? Why does the Christian soldier fall in battle, and the Christian sailor sink in the storm? Why does not the providence of God always interfere to protect His people from disaster and death?

Well, first of all, we must remember that, to the true Christian, death is no disaster, no defeat, but a victory. For the Church to fall, for the cause of truth to be overthrown, would indeed be a calamity of such a nature as to prove that God is either impotent or absent. But for you and me to fall only shows that God has done serving Himself with us on earth and is ready to receive us to our reward in heaven. He is not deserting us, He is not suffering our foes to destroy us: He is delivering and blessing us, when He calls from the church militant to the church triumphant. So that in our departure the Lord of hosts is with us; and then more truly than ever before the God of Jacob becomes our refuge, into whose bosom we fly for everlasting peace.

But we must remember also that even this outward semblance of defeat, this call to lay down our arms

and leave the field, will never come to us until our appointed time has come and we have finished the task which He has allotted to us. "Every man is immortal until his work is done." So long as God has anything for us to do in the world He will take care of us and deliver us from danger. We may lay aside all anxiety and fear. We may rejoice in the stream of inward peace which makes glad the city of God. We may go forth to our labours and our conflicts with good courage and a cheerful heart. Be sure that nothing can harm you while you are with Him.

"Should earth and hell with malice burn,
"Still shalt thou go and still return,
"Safe in the Lord; His heavenly care
"Defends thy life from every snare.

"On thee foul spirits have no power;
"And in thy last departing hour,
"Angels that trace the airy road
"Shall bear thee homeward to thy God."

XI

THE SCHOOL OF DISAPPOINTMENT

Psalm XXXI

THE SCHOOL OF DISAPPOINTMENT

THE writer of this psalm was surrounded by dangers; he was the subject of bitter slanders; his friends had deserted him and his neighbours were afraid to be seen in his company; plots were formed against him and he was threatened with violent death; he was thrust into obscurity and forgotten as a dead man out of mind; his plans were shattered like a broken vessel and his strength was wasted in vain efforts; his life, in its visible results, was a failure and a disappointment. But his confidence in God remained unshaken, and while he submitted with resignation to his fate, he held fast, with inflexible firmness, to his principles, his resolutions, his faith.

Now there is no man in the Hebrew history to whom this description applies so well as it does to the prophet Jeremiah, of whom it has been said that "his ministry may be summed up in three words, good hope, labour, disappointment." [1]

When we come to examine the style and language of the psalm more closely, we find many points of connection with the prophecies of Jeremiah. The "gentle

[1] J. H. Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons: Selection for the Seasons*, p. 442.

elegiac spirit and the quick transitions from suffering to consolation" are characteristic of his work. The phrase "For I have heard the defaming of many, terror on every side," in verse 13, is repeated in Jer. xx. 10. The "broken vessel" is an image which recurs in Jer. xxii. 28; xlviii. 38. The ninth verse reminds us of Lamentations i. 20; the tenth verse, of Jer. xx. 18; the seventeenth verse, of Jer. xvii. 18. We shall therefore be justified, in this case, in correcting the testimony of the ancient scribe who wrote the title, and reading this poem in the light of the story of Jeremiah.[1]

That story is full of the deepest tragic interest. Jeremiah is the central figure in the closing scenes of the kingdom of Judah. About his person the confused conflicts of that melancholy drama raged most fiercely. And as we follow him through his troubled life we are brought into contact with the great political and religious questions of the age; we feel on every side the pressure of those contending forces amid whose furious warfare the city of Jerusalem and the Temple of Jehovah sank at last in dreadful ruin.

Manasseh, who succeeded Hezekiah on the throne of Judah, was a bad ruler and a worse man.[2] He made alliance with the king of Egypt, thereby exposing his kingdom to the wrath of its powerful enemies on the north and east. And he restored the abominations of paganism, filling the land with the fiery worship of Moloch and the licentious rites of Astarte, desecrating the Temple, and slaughtering the prophets so that

[1] So Ewald and Hitzig.

[2] 2 Kings xxi. 2.

Jerusalem was stained from end to end with their blood.[1] His reign of fifty-five years was a relapse into absolute heathenism, a period of general corruption and violent reaction like that which was inaugurated in the Roman empire under Julian the Apostate. The effect of it was the complete destruction of the moral stamina of the nation and its preparation for an inevitable downfall. But before that final calamity arrived there was a brief period of apparent reformation, a bright gleam of hope in the darkened land. Josiah, the grandson of Manasseh, was one of the few kings of Judah who feared the Lord and did that which was right in His sight.[2] Following the example of his great-grandfather Hezekiah, he purged Jerusalem of her idolatries, restored the splendours of the Temple, and reëstablished the worship of Jehovah as the religion of the land. But, most important of all his deeds, he discovered the Book of the Law of God under the rubbish which had accumulated in the sanctuary, and caused it to be read in public before a solemn assembly of the people, making them renew their covenant with God in the very words of the sacred record which had been so long lost and forgotten.[3] It seemed as if a new era of righteousness and peace and prosperity were about to begin under this pious and zealous king Josiah.

But the reformation, admirable in itself, came too late. The author of the Book of Kings, in describing the good deeds of Josiah, adds: "Nevertheless the

[1] 2 Kings xxi. 16.
[2] 2 Chron. xxxiv. 2.
[3] 2 Kings xxii. 8–10; xxiii. 1–3.

Lord turned not from the fierceness of his wrath wherewith his anger had been kindled against Judah."[1] And this means that the nation was beyond salvation. The foundation had been too deeply undermined ever to be restored. The opportunity had passed long ago, and passed unheeded. There is a time when repentance is vain; when reformation may delay, but cannot avert, the punishment of former sins. And such a time had come to Judah. Her doom was sealed. Her efforts to maintain herself, to regain her ancient position, were but the final struggles of the swimmer who has been drifted beyond the reach of safety, and who lifts himself with the strength of desperation above the waves which must finally engulf him. The fate of Jerusalem was destruction. The instrument by which it was to be accomplished, the weapon of destiny, was in God's hand. All that was left for the ill-fated city was to submit and perish.

Now the one man to whom this was revealed was the prophet Jeremiah. Born of a noble family, endowed with the gifts of the prophetic and priestly offices, he was called in his early youth, in the thirteenth year of Josiah's promising reign, to be the destroyer of dawning hopes, the bearer of evil tidings, the messenger of sure-coming doom.[2] By nature compassionate and tender-hearted, by inheritance allied to all that was noblest and strongest in the nation, by conviction in heartiest sympathy with all the efforts of the reformers, his melancholy mission was to proclaim that all those efforts would be unavailing, that all the better elements

[1] 2 Kings xxiii. 26. [2] Jer. i. 1-2.

would be powerless to preserve the national life, and that the bright expectations which had been kindled in the heart of the people must vanish in the gloom of the onward-sweeping night.

The young prophet rebelled against this mission. He sought to evade it; prayed God to release him from the task; pleaded his ignorance, his unfitness, the weakness of his heart.[1] But all in vain. The hand of Divine compulsion was upon him; and whether he was willing or not he must fulfil his bitter duty. It separated him from the aspirations of his age; made him lonely, wretched, unpopular, persecuted; he was the best-hated man in Jerusalem. But in spite of this he must be true to truth; he must declare the decree of God; he must unveil the future of his country even though his heart was breaking while he spoke the heavy words.

Every age has had its Jeremiahs, its warning voices uplifted to contradict the delusions of ill-founded hope, its prophecies of peril in the midst of apparent prosperity, its vaticinations of punishment in the face of over-confident pride. Cassandra on the wall of windy Troy, Dante flying from ill-counselled Florence, Tennyson picturing the shame and danger of self-contented England,[2] — these are the prophets whom their own contemporaries revile as pessimists, but whom later times revere and honour as the faithful watchmen, the voices that speak truth even through their own tears.

There were two points against which the prophecies of Jeremiah were especially directed. First was the

[1] Jer. i. 6.

[2] *Locksley Hall, Sixty Years After.*

notion that this reformation which had been begun was thorough, and sufficient to avert the coming evil. It was indeed only a surface change; the heart of the people was still corrupt; prophets and priests were banded together in an alliance of hypocrisy; for "the prophets prophesied falsely and the priests bore rule by their means; and the people loved to have it so."[1]

They had come to trust in their renovated Temple and their restored Ark as a sort of magical protection against harm. They used the name of Jehovah as an incantation, and repeated the words of the newly-discovered Law as if they were nothing more than the empty phrases of a charm.[2] Against all this Jeremiah declared that the Temple should be no greater security to them than the ancient sanctuary of Shiloh which had perished long ago;[3] that the external law could not save them, but there must be a new spiritual covenant written on their hearts.[4] In brief, he taught them that the guilt of the nation could not be purged, nor its diseases healed by any reform of ritual or doctrine. There must be an inward, spiritual change, and this must be wrought, by God's appointment, in the fiery furnace of affliction.

The second notion against which Jeremiah prophesied was the popular theory that the nation was to be delivered from the dangers which threatened it by the help of the king of Egypt. It has been well said that the kingdom of Judah at this time was like a trembling fugitive between two fierce wild beasts. On the

[1] Jer. v. 31.
[2] Jer. xxiii. 30–40.
[3] Jer. vii. 12–15.
[4] Jer. xxxi. 33, 34.

south was Pharaoh-Necho, who had restored and enlarged the powers of that great empire which was older than history and strong with the might of centuries. On the north was Nabopolassar, who had raised the new empire of Babylonia on the ruins of Assyria and created a conquering army which was the terror of the world. Whichever way Judah turned her face, destruction menaced her, as these two mighty adversaries moved with relentless hatred to meet each other in deadly conflict. Independence was impossible. To remain neutral was to incur the enmity of both and to be crushed to death between them. The only hope of safety lay in practical friendship with one or the other of the great rivals. The strong feeling in favour of an alliance with Egypt had been deepened almost into a national tradition by the policy of Manasseh. But the prophets had always protested against it as a source of weakness rather than of strength, and Josiah, probably influenced by the warnings of Jeremiah, broke loose from the entanglement and arrayed himself against Egypt.[1] His death in battle was regarded as a national calamity and was followed by an intense reaction. The friendship of the great Pharaoh seemed to be the only hope of Judah. All who ventured to oppose it were hated, reviled, persecuted, as traitors to their country. But Jeremiah stood faithful to his prophetic trust in the face of scorn and danger. It had been revealed to him that this new empire of Babylon was destined to overthrow all its rivals, that this new and mighty king Nebuchad-

[1] 2 Chron. xxxv. 10–25.

nezzar was the scourge of God to punish the nations, Judah among the number. Therefore Jeremiah cried out earnestly against the Egyptian alliance, and counselled submission to Babylon as the only course of safety.[1] He was mocked and despised for his advice. His own family cast him off, his friends forsook him, the people sought to slay him. The king Jehoiakim scorned his warnings, and cast the roll on which they were written into the fire.[2] Through the successive reigns of Jehoahaz, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, the prophet repeated his expostulations, his entreaties. The burden of his cry was "Submit to Babylon, bow your necks to the inevitable yoke, acknowledge the decree of God, spare the fruitless struggle, the vain revolt." But his only reward was obloquy and persecution. He was threatened, beaten, cast into prison.[3] His life became a long, bitter martyrdom. And at last he saw the evil which he had predicted descend upon the doomed city. He saw the streets of Jerusalem piled with carcasses and running with blood, the royal family led in chains into captivity, the heathen host rushing in to defile the sanctuary, the bodies of the buried kings torn from their sepulchres, the fierce flames leaping from palace and dwelling-house and Temple, the ancient enemies of Judah, — Ammonite, Moabite, Philistine, Edomite, — clapping their hands over her downfall and joining in the slaughter of her fugitives, — while Zion, the proud, the beautiful, lay desolate and naked, a prey for vultures and

[1] Jer. xxvii. 1–11.
[2] Jer. xxxvi. 21–23.
[3] Jer. xx. 2; xxxvii. 15–21; xxxviii. 6.

jackals.[1] Thus the prophet beheld the fulfilment of the warnings which it had broken his heart to utter; and this is the story of Jeremiah.

Turn now to the psalm which we have connected with this story and take from it three expressions which will give us the spirit of the whole composition.

1. The first is from the thirteenth verse: —

"Fear was on every side."

This is a phrase which was almost proverbial with Jeremiah. It occurs no less than six times in his writings. And it graphically describes not only his outward circumstances, but also his inward conflict. For Jeremiah was not naturally a fearless man. It was not easy for him to stand out alone against his people and fulfil his gloomy and perilous mission. He shrank with trembling from the task. But so much the greater appears his courage. For he is not the bravest man who knows no fear; but he who conquers his terrors and does his duty is the true hero.

2. The second phrase is in the fifteenth verse: —

"My times are in thy hand."

In this we see an expression of the prophet's entire submission to the will of God. He feels that all the vicissitudes of his life, its joys and its sorrows, its successes and its failures, its consolations and its disappointments, are absolutely at the Divine disposal. Not only the to-morrow-time which can be foreseen to a certain extent and probably predicted, not only the eternity-time of which faith gives assurance that it

[1] Jer. xxxix.; Ezek. ix.; 2 Chron. xxxvi. 15–21; Ezek. xxv. 6, 8, 15.

will be happy, but all the unknown between-times, the long chain of connecting links, the "sundry and manifold changes," are ordered and controlled by God. This is a kind of fatalism, you may think; but it is the right kind of fatalism. For it does not subject us to the caprice of chance, nor to the stern compulsion of an unconscious necessity, but to the will of an all-wise and all-merciful Father. Happy and strong and brave shall we be, — able to endure all things, and to do all things, — if we believe that every day, every hour, every moment of our life is in His hands.

3. The third expression is in the twentieth verse: —

"In the covert of thy presence shalt thou hide them from the plottings of man:
"Thou shalt keep them secretly in a pavilion from the strife of tongues." [1]

Think what a comfort this faith must have been in a life like that of Jeremiah. He was surrounded by wars and rumours of war. The city where he lived was full of contending parties and civil strife. He heard the slander of many. His motives were impugned. His life was threatened. His faith was derided. But his soul had one safe refuge in the presence of God and the consciousness that he was doing the Divine will with sincere fidelity. Here he found peace and security. A conscience void of offence towards God is the high sanctuary which can never be violated.

It may be that you and I shall never be called to

[1] One of the greatest of Phillips Brooks's sermons is written on this text.

pass through sufferings and trials like those of Jeremiah. It may be that our country will never forfeit its great privileges and hasten by the pathway of idolatry and iniquity to a ruinous downfall. It may be that we shall never have to protest alone against the corruptions of an apostate church. But it can hardly be, if we are true Christians, that we shall not be forced at some time or other to take the unpopular side. It can hardly be that we shall never feel the hostile pressure of the pride of man, and the stinging arrows of the strife of tongues. Then we shall need a refuge, and we shall find it only in the loyal adherence to our convictions, in the faithful performance of our duty, which shall bring us so near to God that we can feel His presence encircling, embracing, hiding us, and can say to Him, My Lord, I have been true to Thee, and I know that Thou wilt surely be true to me.

XII

THE LAST SIGH OF THE EXILE

Psalm XLII

THE LAST SIGH OF THE EXILE

When the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella had overcome the heroic resistance of the Moors, and the fair city of Granada had surrendered to its Christian conquerors, the long train of defeated warriors, with their wives and children, passed in silence from their lost home, and took their way through the mountain passes towards the land of banishment. They could not bear to look upon the triumph of their victors. They turned their backs upon the city, and marched with downcast eyes among the hills. But when they arrived at the eminence which commands the last view of Granada, the historian tells us that they "paused involuntarily to take a farewell gaze at their beloved capital, which a few steps more would shut from their sight forever. Never had it appeared so lovely in their eyes. The Moorish cavaliers gazed with a silent agony of tenderness and grief upon that delicious abode, the scene of their loves and pleasures. While they yet looked, a light cloud of smoke burst forth from the citadel, and presently a peal of artillery faintly heard told that the city was taken possession of and the throne of the Moslem kings was lost forever. The heart of Boabdil, softened by misfortunes and over-

charged with grief, could no longer contain itself. 'Allah Achbar! (God is great!)' said he; but the words of resignation died upon his lips and he burst into tears."[1] Even to this day that range of hills which commands the first and last prospect of Granada is known as "El ultimo suspiro del Moro," — the last sigh of the Moor.

The story is beautiful. But how much more pathetic and exquisite is the narrative which this forty-second psalm brings to mind; and how much better does the mountain-side of Hermon deserve the name of "The Last Sigh"! For here also we see a band of exiles going forth, after a brave but vain resistance, from their fallen city. Here also we trace their dejected wanderings along the steep and rocky road which led them away from all that they held dear into a strange and distant country. And here at length we see them pausing, perhaps at the close of a weary day's march, in the land beyond Jordan, on the first lofty ridge of the eastern mountains, and turning for a long parting look at their beautiful and beloved Zion. Among these same hills their father Jacob had seen his great vision of the Hosts of God.[2] Here, also, from Pisgah's height, their deliverer Moses had first looked upon the bright and beckoning landscape of the Promised Land.[3] But now that landscape, fair as ever, breathed a mute farewell. It was the last look at the home of their love, the citadel of their pride, the shrine of their devotion. Every eye was dim with unshed

[1] Washington Irving, *Conquest of Granada*, p. 525.

[2] Gen. xxxii. 1. [3] Deut. xxxiv. 1.

tears, and the well-remembered outlines of the scene trembled and wavered like the edges of a dream. There was mourning and wailing of young and old, warriors and women, priests and princes, — a cry went up like the confused lamentation of a household into which death has entered. And then, when perhaps the wailing had died away a little, and the eyes of the people were feeding in silent hunger upon the vanishing scene, this sweet and plaintive song arose from the lips of some inspired minstrel and floated out above the throng.

We do not know who it was that uttered the heart-felt melody.[1] Some have conjectured that the author was the king Jeconiah or Jehoiakin, whom the Chaldeans carried away to Babylon in the fourth month of his reign. But whoever the psalmist may have been, one thing is clear, he was a captive, as well as an exile. He was surrounded by those to whom his religion was a jest and his God an object of contempt. To whom does this language apply so well as to those soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar, worshippers of Nebo, exultant in the

[1] The psalm has been attributed to David at the time when he was fleeing from Absalom. But this seems to me to rob it of its peculiar beauty; and moreover it is impossible to reconcile such an interpretation with the contents of the psalm. For during David's flight he was not surrounded by foes who mocked him for his faith in God, but by friends who were loyal and devoted to his cause. He could not have described himself as "mourning all the day because of the oppression of the enemy." Others have supposed that it was written by one of the priests who were shut out by Jeroboam from all access to the temple. Others, again, that it was composed by one of the Levites whom Athaliah drove away from Jerusalem. But these conjectures appear far-fetched.

resistless power and surpassing glory of their deity, who drove the Hebrews across the mountains and the plains to grace their master's triumphs on the banks of the Euphrates? Well might those proud idolaters taunt their prisoners with the vanity of their trust in an invisible Jehovah. Well might they say in the accents of incredulous derision, "Where is now your God?" And the question must have added a new and deeper pang to the misery of the conquered Hebrews.

But it may be that the inscription of the psalm gives us a hint in regard to its authorship which ought not to be disregarded. It is one of the twelve compositions which the ancient compiler of the Book of Psalms ascribed to "the sons of Korah." Now, Korah was that unhappy man who led the impious rebellion against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness and perished in an earthquake. But his descendants seem to have had little regard for the law of heredity; for the family of Korah, in later days, became the leaders of sacred song in the service of the Temple,[1] and the honoured doorkeepers or wardens of the House of the Lord.[2] The dignity in which they held this office is expressed in the familiar verse of the 84th Psalm: "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness." The psalms which bear their names are marked by an intense delight in the worship of the sanctuary, and a spirit of lyrical fervour which makes them among the most beautiful of the whole collection.

If, then, we may follow the suggestion of the title,

[1] 2 Chron. xx. 19. [2] 1 Chron. ix. 17–19.

we shall think of one of these minstrels who had been set apart from his very childhood to the service of sacred music, whose whole life had grown around the Temple as the vine twines itself about the tree which supports it; one to whom the House of God had been the centre of all activity and joy, something more glorious than a palace, something dearer than a home; one whose occupation might have seemed to be gone and his art without a purpose when he was driven away from the Holy Place, — we shall think of such a man standing in one of the many companies of Jewish captives who paused on the slope of Hermon's mountain barrier to take their last look and breathe their last sigh towards Zion; and we shall see him touching his harp with a tremulous hand, and pouring forth these "profuse strains of unpremeditated art" to relieve and comfort himself and his fellow-prisoners.

Wondrous power of music! How often has it brought peace, and help, and strength to weary and downcast pilgrims! It penetrates the bosom and unlocks the doors of secret, dumb, self-consuming anguish, so that the sorrow flowing out may leave the soul unburdened and released. It touches the chords of memory, and the cadence of old songs brings back the happy scenes of the past. In the rude mining camp, cut off by the snows of winter, in the narrow cabin of the ship ice-bound in Arctic seas, in the bare, dark rooms of Libby prison where the captive soldiers are trying to beguile the heavy time in company, tears steal down the rough cheeks, and voices quaver with half-pain, half-pleasure, when some one strikes up the

familiar notes of "Home, Sweet Home." Music lends a strange sweetness to the remembrance of the past, and makes the troubles of the present heavier, yet easier to bear. And then it borrows the comfort of hope. It drops the threads of sorrow one by one, and catches the sweet beams of light reflected from the future, and weaves them magically in among its harmonies, blending, brightening, softening the mystic web, until we are enclosed, we know not how, in a garment of consolation, and the cold, tired heart finds itself warmed, and rested, and filled with courage. Most gracious ministry of music! Happy are they who know how to exercise it in simplicity and love; happy they whose life-pilgrimage is cheered and lightened by such service. It was well for that band of dejected pilgrims, looking back from the hill Mizar towards their distant home, that there was one of the sons of Korah among them, who understood how to mingle the melody of comfort with the Last Sigh of the Exile.

The psalm is divided into two parts, each closing with a strong and joyful exhortation to hope in God. This may be considered as the refrain, the emphatic phrase, which is twice repeated as if it were worth twice as much as the other verses, precious as they may be. So then we will keep this for the last, and listen first to the minor motives of the psalm.

1. The first part expresses the thirst of the soul for God in a figure so beautiful that it has become the common symbol of religious longing. David used almost the same figure, you remember, in the sixty-third

psalm. "My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land where no water is." But this psalmist lends a new touch of pathos to the familiar language when he says: —

> "As the hart panteth after the water-brooks,
> "So panteth my soul after thee, O God."

This is something deeper and more urgent than the intellectual craving for the Infinite, the natural desire and impulse of the human mind to seek a perfect object for its thought. It is something more, even, than the aspiration of a sinful and self-disappointed soul towards moral beauty and stainless holiness. It is the personal longing for intimate communion with the living God. To come into vital contact with God, not as a Remote Thought, but as a living Person; to feel that He who made the universe is not only the Eternal Wisdom but the wise God, not only the Infinite Love but the loving Father; to be assured by touch of soul that He is an ever-present Reality, and to perceive the gentle flow of His affection within the channel of the heart; — this is the water of everlasting life, the only draught that can truly quench the craving of the spirit. The assurance of immortality alone is not enough. For if we are told that we are to live forever and still left without the knowledge of a personal God, eternity stretches before us like a boundless desert, a perpetual and desolate orphanage. It is a Divine companionship that the spirit needs first of all and most deeply.[1]

[1] "For of the two — eternity without a personal God, or God for seventy years without immortality — no one after David's heart would hesitate. 'Give me God for life, to know, and be known by Him.'" — F. W. Robertson, *Sermons*, 2d Series, viii.

Now this need is always present, but it is not always conscious. It does not take the form of an active and definite desire — a spiritual thirst — until the pressure of pain and distress comes upon us and forces us back upon the realities of our existence. There is much of our life in which the intellectual knowledge of God, the recognition of the order and harmony which testify of His presence in the physical and moral reign of law, seems at least to content us. But there are other times when a great drouth falls upon the inner world, when the accustomed streams of delight shrink and fail within their beds, when the heavens of emotion withhold their rain and the pastures of thought are dry and dewless, when the soul seems to be hurried and driven to and fro until its strength is all exhausted — like a hunted gazelle, forced by the very exertions of flight to pant more eagerly for the cool springs from which flight has separated it. Then all the theological definitions of God, even the records of His revelations to other men, seem vain and worthless. It is God Himself for whom the heart pants and longs.

The psalmist tells us what were the two things in his own experience which brought this craving into consciousness, and made it so intense and poignant that it must find expression. The first was the pressure of surrounding unbelief, brought home to him by the taunts of his heathen captors. The second was the memory of past joys and religious privileges, now lost and left behind in the land from which he was separated.

We do not need to be taken prisoner by the Chal-

deans and carried away to Babylon in order to understand the meaning of these causes of spiritual thirst. They repeat themselves, in a thousand different forms, in every life. We are often standing upon the hill of sighs and looking back to the pleasant places which our feet shall tread no more, recalling the opportunities which have departed, remembering the sweet Sabbaths in the home of childhood, the mornings when we went with the multitude of friends to the house of God, the quiet evenings filled with the voice of sacred song, the days when it seemed easy and natural to be good, when gracious currents of holy influence were bearing us onward, almost without effort, towards a better life. We are often oppressed and dismayed by the close contact of an unbelieving world. We feel surrounded, shut in, imprisoned by hostile influences. It may be that there are no mocking voices to ridicule or deny our faith. But none the less are we conscious of moving among men and women who are ignorant of our God, careless of our hopes, indifferent to our spiritual welfare. All their conduct, their absorbing occupations, their whirling pleasures, their very forms of speech and manners, seem like an involuntary denial of the truth of religion. We are borne along with them in their march, cannot escape from them, cannot disentangle our lives from theirs. They have power over us, and their very presence suggests the questions of practical skepticism, and threatens us with the captivity of a godless life. The air of the world is heavy, parched, suffocating. We must find some relief, something to refresh and quicken our souls.

Well for us, then, if we realize that the living God is the only spring of life, and search inward until we find Him.

2. This is what the second part of the psalm describes, — this inward search, this secret finding: —

> "I remember thee from the land of Jordan,
> "And the Hermons, from the hill Mizar." [1]

It is no longer the outward scene of the Temple worship which the psalmist recalls. His memory goes deeper, to the Divine presence which made that worship real and blessed. God was there, in the midst of the festal throng in the splendid sanctuary; but He is also here, on the cold slopes of snowy Hermon. And though the roaring of the flooded Jordan, the wild voice of cataracts calling and answering from deep to deep, now blends with the voice of the singer, though the breakers and billows of sorrow have swept over him, yet even here in exile, —

> "The Lord will command his loving-kindness in the daytime,"

and will give songs in the night. It is true that the enemies are still present, and that they have power to taunt and distress. But now, mark you, the psalmist does not listen to them alone. He does not sink into gloomy silence. He turns inward to that closer, greater Presence. He tells it all to the Companion whom he has found: —

> "I will say unto God, my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me?
> "Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"

It is no longer a sigh breathed into the air; no longer a flood of tears on which the soul feeds in solitude.[2]

[1] Compare Jonah ii. 7.

[2] Verse 3.

It is a direct and personal prayer to Him who is always near. It is no longer a pouring out of the soul upon itself,[1] a self-communion of despair. It is a pouring out of the soul upon God; and though the current be one of sorrow it establishes a real connection. When you can talk to God, when you can really tell Him what is in your heart, then you have found religion. For religion is nothing else than a living tie, a channel of vital intercourse between God and man.

3. And now, along this very channel which grief has opened, flows back the stream of joy. As if the message of trouble had passed the message of help midway in its course; as if a hidden voice had "whispered heavenly cheer;" as if a spring of comfort had suddenly been unsealed in the midst of the desert, the refrain of the psalm breaks forth: —

> "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?
> "And why art thou disquieted within me?
> "Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him,
> "Who is the health of my countenance and my God."

Thy feelings will ebb and flow, thy heart will grow warm in summer's glow and cold in winter's chill, thou wilt be brave and steadfast to-day, downcast and anxious to-morrow. Thy streams will be full in the rainy season, and in the time of drouth they will be bare beds of stone. Turn away from thyself. Hope in God. He fainteth not, neither is weary. He is the unfailing fountain; His affections do not decay; with Him is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.

[1] Verse 4.

When thou art dismayed, He is still full of an eternal peace. When thou art downcast, He is still untroubled. Is He not everywhere? Does not the sun shine as brightly on this bare mountain and on the distant walls of Babylon as on the dismantled towers of Zion? Will he not rise to-morrow as calmly and surely as he rose to-day? Turn to Him and He shall be the health of thy countenance. Look towards the light, and thy shadow shall fall behind thee, and thou shalt march even into exile with a song upon thy lips and the brightness of an everlasting hope shining in thy face.

Thus the son of Korah takes his last look toward the city of his love, turns his back upon the dear scene, and plods onward into captivity. Farewell Jerusalem! But not farewell God! For in that friendship there is no parting, and from that presence there is no banishment.

XIII

"BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON"

PSALM CXXXVII

"BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON"

In this plaintive song the Hebrew poet has caught the very spirit of captivity. He not only makes us hear the exiles' complaint, but he brings before the inward eye the scene of their banishment.

Babylon was emphatically a land of many rivers. The city itself was built beside the main channel of the Euphrates, upon which all the streets terminated and all the gates opened. Level, straight, rectangular, like the dream of a mathematician, it was laid out on a similar plan to that which William Penn chose for his city on the banks of the Delaware.[1] The circuit of its walls was more than forty miles.

The surrounding country was a vast plain, made fertile by the innumerable streams which either flowed into the Euphrates, or were diverted from it in canals of irrigation. Through a thousand minor channels the river rolled its sluggish tide, and the whole region was covered with a network of watercourses. Their banks

[1] "Much according to this model William Penn, the Quaker, laid out the plan for his city of Philadelphia. . . . Yet fifty-six of such cities might stand in the walls that encompassed Babylon." — Prideaux' *Connections*, quoted by Dean Stanley. But this was written many years ago; and now the Philadelphians can boast of a more favourable comparison in point of size.

were marked by long lines of trees, stretching away in endless parallels to the horizon. It was a landscape of orderly cultivation, opulent, peaceful, symmetrical. Nature seemed to be full of quiet self-complacency. Her breathing was slow and regular as if she were well-fed and willing to repose. Thus doubtless it appeared to the proud and prosperous Babylonians as they looked upon their fat land.

But to the captive Hebrews the aspect of Mesopotamia was very different. For it is strange how much of the expression of Nature depends on our own mood when we look at her. She is forever playing the familiar and deceptive rôle of the sympathetic friend. She reflects the face of the beholder.

> "We receive but what we give,
> "And in our life alone does Nature live;
> "Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!" [1]

The Jewish exiles saw in this flat plain, spread out beneath the flat sky, the emblem of eternal monotony. The voice of the slow-moving streams was not like the glad shout of the torrents in their own native land, nor even like the wild roaring of the swollen Jordan when "deep answered unto deep" at the noise of the cataracts. It was a dull, heavy voice, like the murmur of complaint, like the dropping of continual tears. How slowly the waters moved, but not more slowly than the tedious hours! How endlessly the long lines of streets and canals and trees prolonged themselves into the distance, without break, without change, without uplifting, like mute prophecies of interminable weariness! How sadly

[1] S. T. Coleridge, *Dejection.*

the wind sighed through the branches of the willows, — long, drooping, swaying with every breath of air, — surely these were no longer the emblems of prosperity but of grief, and they must henceforth be called the "weeping willows."[1] Thus the prisoners sat beside the waters, and their harps were silent, and they could not sing the old songs, — not because they could not remember, but because they could not forget, nor cease to desire Zion.

When we speak of the Hebrews as prisoners in Babylon, we must bear in mind that the word is not used in its ordinary and literal sense. They were neither chained nor thrust into dungeons. They were not even treated as the serfs of their conquerors. So far as we can learn from the writings of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and from the Apocryphal books of Tobit and Baruch, their condition was not marked by any social or civil disqualifications. They bought lands and built houses and planted gardens.[2] They dwelt at ease in the land, marrying their children and bringing up their households according to the laws of Moses. They increased in numbers and in wealth, and (unless the Chaldeans were more active and sharp than most modern races) they probably succeeded in getting at least a reasonable share of the trade of Babylon into their hands. They even entered into public life, and attained the highest positions at the royal court.

[1] Previous to this time the willow had been used as a symbol of joy. Its branches were employed in the construction of booths for the Feast of Tabernacles. Isaiah compares the offspring of Israel to willows springing up by the watercourses. (Is. xliv. 4.)

[2] Jer. xxix. 5–7.

Daniel became the ruler of the province of Babylon;[1] Nehemiah held the princely office of cup-bearer to the king.[2] The Hebrews in Babylon were in no sense an unprosperous or oppressed community. They were not slaves. They were simply enforced colonists, and though their immigration had been compulsory, their reception was far from harsh, nor was their treatment ungenerous. So far as worldly welfare was concerned they were perhaps better off than they had been in Judea.

How, then, are we to account for the tone of deep humiliation and bitter sorrow which pervades the allusions to this period in the Hebrew Scriptures? How are we to understand the melancholy complaints of this psalm of the captivity? It would seem more natural that the minstrels should have rejoiced in their comfort under the willows, beside the tranquil streams, and should have learned gladly to mingle the new songs of Chaldea with the ancient melodies of their native land.

And so it would have been if worldly welfare were the chief element in human happiness, if physical ease and outward prosperity could content the heart. But there are deeper needs and cravings in our nature, necessities more vital and imperious, and while these live and remain unsatisfied, happiness is impossible. It is true that these cravings are liable to perish in men who are willing to give themselves up to a life of mere bodily enjoyment. It is true that they have perished to a large extent in the gross materialism of our modern civilization, so that there are multitudes of men at

[1] Dan. ii. 48. [2] Neh. i. 11.

present to whom it makes but little difference where or how they live, provided they are in outward comfort. It was true also, no doubt, that in many of the Hebrews the influences of Babylon produced the same effect, so that they ceased to bewail their banishment, and were careless of the opportunity to return from it. But in the noblest and best of the people, in the hearts of the true Israelites, there was a perpetual sorrow, an incessant longing, which the pleasures of Chaldea could never still. Three elements, it seems to me, must certainly have entered into their grief.

1. The love of liberty.

There is no deeper passion than this, native to the human heart. To be free, to move in accordance with voluntary choice, to render submission only where it is due, to follow reason and conscience willingly without the compulsion of brute force, — this is the instinct of personality. The nobler the race, the more highly developed the individual, the stronger and more ardent does this passion become. It is no mere self-asserting spirit of revolt against lawful authority, no wild, untrammeled desire to fling the reins upon the neck of appetite and indulge the personal impulses without restraint. The lover of liberty is always a lover of law. He desires to follow the best, not the worst; and he rebels, not against the restraints of justice, but against the constraints of power; not against the yoke of service, but against the chains of bondage. To be controlled without right or reason, to feel the pressure of an alien will merely as a stronger force, crushing, constraining, imprisoning his will, — that is misery.

Against such bondage the most heroic struggles of history have been waged. The wars of Greece against Persia, of Holland against Spain, of Switzerland against Austria, of the American Colonies against Great Britain, are ever-memorable achievements of the love of liberty. Men have chosen to be impoverished, to suffer untold hardships, to die, rather than be deprived of liberty. To be free in the desert is better than to be in bondage in a palace. But when the struggle is hopeless, nothing remains for the noble spirit but to be wretched. And thus the rich land of Chaldea, the splendid city of Babylon, the fair gardens and the magnificent parks, seemed to the liberty-loving Hebrews odious and dreary, because they were there against their will. They were subject to an authority which they had never chosen. The superior force of their conquerors held them captive by a chain which was none the lighter because it was unseen.

2. The love of country.

This is not a quality which is native to man. For in the earlier stages of human history the race was nomadic, wandering to and fro in tents, and regarding the whole globe as its country. But as civilization advanced, families, tribes, communities, became fixed in local habitations, acquired title and attachment to certain portions of the earth ; and so in the hearts of men there grew up a sentiment of strong and permanent affection for the places where they were born and lived. It is difficult to analyze, and perhaps difficult to justify, this sentiment on abstract grounds. But as a concrete thing, as a motive power in human life, it is real,

and true, and immensely potent. It is quite independent of the considerations of outward beauty or comparative advantage. The Greenlander will sigh among the Tropics for the snow-clad wastes of his home. The Highlander clings to the barren hillsides of Scotland, and would rather starve on Scotch oatmeal than revel in the abundance of a foreign land. The Irish peasant (at least he of the type which Mr. Parnell claims is the best) prefers the Green Isle and eviction to America and an estate. The Swiss soldier, so the old books tell us, was wont to die of longing for the sight of his beloved mountains. And I suppose there are some of us who think even yet, although the cosmopolitan spirit has destroyed so many of our illusions and the old-fashioned emotions are dying out so fast, that there is no place on earth like "our own, our native land."

Now there never was a race in whom this sentiment of local attachment — the patriotism of the soil — was more firmly rooted, more highly developed, than it was in the Hebrews. To them the land of Canaan had become almost a religion. It had been promised to them by God. It had been won by the most strenuous and heroic exertions. It was hallowed by innumerable sacred associations. Their pride, their love, all centred there; no mountains like those of Judea, no plains so fair, no valleys so delightful, no streams so sweet and clear, no city like Jerusalem, beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth. To be absent from their land was to be in shame and sorrow. All the pleasures of Babylon, the wonderful fertility, the cultivated beauty

of the Mesopotamian plain, could not console them. They pined in banishment. They were homesick for Jerusalem.

And then to remember that their land was not only distant but desolate; that all her pleasant places had been laid waste and her former glories destroyed; that her high city had been cast down, and the hill of Zion covered with ruins, — this was indeed a heavy thought, which made their exile almost intolerable, and silenced all song upon their lips.

3. The love of religion.

Not in all hearts was this passion equally strong. But in the hearts of the purest and best among the Hebrews it was the master-passion. They never had been willing to regard their God as one among many equal deities, or to think of their worship as to be compared with that of the heathen. Jehovah was the sole and sovereign Lord, the one living and true God. His Temple was *the* sacred place, none other like it for holiness or beauty. And now that Temple was overthrown and defiled. That divinely-ordered worship was silenced. They were thrust into close contact with all the abominations of idolatry. They were forced to witness the worship of their heathen conquerors, to listen to their taunts and jeers against the true religion, to endure the continual presence of their scornful unbelief. In spiritual things they were desolate and lonely, like the pelican of the wilderness, like the owl of the desert.[1] How should they sing, at the bidding of their captors, those holy songs which once had echoed

[1] Psalm cii. 6,

through the courts of Zion? Mirth and music were not fitting for those days of darkness, of trial, of weary waiting, in a land that knew not Jehovah. If they sang at all it should be a new song, written in a minor key, and tuned to the sadness of their souls. A song of faithful memory: —

> "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
> "Let my right hand forget her cunning.
> "Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,
> "If I remember thee not;
> "If I prefer not Jerusalem
> "Above my chief joy."

There is something exquisitely beautiful and tender in these strains, a spirit of true religious devotion which we might do well to catch. Do we feel this deep and sensitive love for our religion and all that is associated with it? Is absence from its sacred places and privileges painful to us? Does contact with unbelief and practical heathenism distress us? Do we feel like exiles and captives, when, as often happens, we are surrounded and shut in by the manifold idolatries of the world? It is to be feared that, in the matter of warm religious affection, of steadfast heart-loyalty, we have something yet to learn ere we can say that we never forget Zion, and ever prefer Jerusalem above our chief joy.

But the psalm does not end here. There are yet three verses which demand our attention, — verses written in a different spirit, and which we must frankly acknowledge are full of difficulty. The psalmist turns from his tender recollections of Zion to invoke punishment upon her enemies and destroyers.

" Remember, O Lord, against the children of Edom
" The day of Jerusalem;
" Who said, Rase it, rase it,
" Even to the foundation thereof.
" O daughter of Babylon, that art to be destroyed,
" Happy shall he be that rewardeth thee,
" As thou hast served us.
" Happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones
" Against the rock."

This is an imprecation, or in plain language a curse; and though there can be no doubt about its historic truth as a report of language which a Hebrew psalmist at that time would have been likely to use, or about its prophetic accuracy as a foreshadowing of the fate which actually befell Edom and Babylon; the question still remains, — and it is a question of real and vital importance to the integrity of our faith in the Bible, — How are we to reconcile these words with the spirit of Christ, who taught His disciples to bless their enemies,[1] and the doctrine of St. Paul, who said, " Bless, and curse not " ?[2]

There are four ways in which we may answer this question; four views which have been taken of the imprecatory psalms.

First is the theory that these passages of denunciation are not imprecations but predictions; that they do not express the wish of the speaker, but merely his knowledge of what will occur in the future. We may dispose of this view at once, by stating that it is not true. There are some of the psalms to which it applies; but in many of them the language will not bear this construction.

[1] St. Matt. v. 44. [2] Rom. xii. 14.

It is better to leave the Scriptures undefended than to defend them by deceitful expedients.

Second is the theory that these imprecations are not the utterances of private individuals, but of the representatives of the nation, who are speaking not only on behalf of the chosen people, but also in the name of truth and religion. This undoubtedly justifies many of the psalms, especially those of David, from the charge of personal violence and revengeful feeling. It is proper for a public man, a ruler, or a spokesman of the people, to utter denunciations and threats of punishment, which would be out of place in the mouth of a private person. But even this does not go far enough to justify the exaction of vengeance upon helpless and innocent children. It may account for the prayer against Edom and the prophecy against Babylon, but the "slaughter of the innocents" will not come under the cloak of public expediency and national retribution.

Third is the theory which regards these imprecations as the inspired expression of a just anger against the enemies of God, and defends them on the ground of righteous indignation. And here, also, we must admit a certain amount of validity in the defence. There is such a thing as righteous indignation, and the world would fare badly without it. The opponents of truth and righteousness, the heathen foes of the Divine religion, all who are implacably arrayed against the cause and kingdom of Jehovah, must perish. And doubtless it is quite consistent with the character of God that those whom He inspired as His prophets

should both predict and invoke the punishment of the wicked. But even this theory, stretch it as far as it will go, fails to cover the last verse of our psalm. For surely not the most righteous indignation can justify the psalmist in calling down a blessing upon the man who should dash the Babylonian little ones against the stones. This is more than just severity; it is barbarous cruelty. Every better instinct of humanity, every true sentiment of Christian love, is offended and wounded by such language.

There remains but one other way of treating it; and that is to say frankly that it is the language of an age which is past, the expression of a spirit which is superseded, for all true believers, by the spirit of Jesus Christ.

It is true that the Old Testament is part of the word of God. But it is the word of God spoken through men who were but partially enlightened, who had not yet received the full and perfect revelation of Divine truth. There were certain things permitted in them which are not permitted in us. They were partakers of the quality of the times in which they lived. And in the letter of their utterances we must discern, if we are candid and clear-sighted, the discolorations of human passion and prejudice. It was natural for a Hebrew, writing in the days when warfare was barbarous, and conquest often meant extermination, to approve of the destruction of the children of the heathen. But for a Christian to use such language or to cherish such sentiments would be utterly intolerable. Christ has given us a fuller light. Christ has taught us a more excellent way.

Surely we are doing no despite to the Bible, nor are we propounding any other theory of inspiration than that which was taught and illustrated by Jesus Christ, when we say that there are some things in the Old Testament which have been left far behind, made forever obsolete, by the revelation which is given to us in the New Testament. Did not the Master himself say the same thing when He taught His disciples that His spirit was different from the spirit of Elijah?[1]

There is much in the Psalms which is perfect and enduring, and which goes forward with us into the Christian life. But there is also something which is imperfect and transitory. And so this fearful picture of vengeance invoked upon the helpless babies of Babylon falls back into the darkness of the past, as we hear the voice of Christ saying, "Suffer the little children to come unto me," and realize that it is our duty to forgive and bless and help, not only the children of our enemies, but even our enemies themselves.

[1] St. Luke ix. 55.

XIV

THE PRAISE OF PRAYER

Psalm CVII

THE PRAISE OF PRAYER

LORD BACON has remarked in one of his Essays that "*Prosperity* is the Blessing of the Old Testament; *Adversity* is the Blessing of the New." But the wise philosopher has not failed to note that this general rule has its exceptions. Even in the earlier dispensation trouble was often medicinal, and sorrow brought its benediction, so that in the experience of men like Job and David affliction became a benefit, and patience had her perfect work.

It has often been remarked that there is no instance in the Old Testament in which this New Testament blessing is more clearly anticipated and illustrated than in the history of the Babylonish captivity. We considered in connection with the one hundred and thirty-seventh psalm, some of the trials and sorrows of that period; we glanced also at some of the mitigations of its hardships, the social and material advantages which the Hebrews enjoyed. But there is one thing which we are most likely to overlook, because it lies beneath the surface; and that is the effect of the captivity upon the moral and religious character of the people. It actually produced a deep and lasting change. It brought out into intense relief certain qualities which had long

been overlaid and hidden; and at the same time it developed new and noble traits in harmony with them. It gave to these, under the pressure of adverse circumstances, a rock-like hardness and consistency; and we shall find that some of the direct results of the captivity are perpetuated in the faith and character of the Christian Church.

In the first place, it was in this period that Israel was finally delivered from the besetting sin of idolatry. While the Jews were in their own land they were continually hankering after strange gods, trying experiments in religion, imitating the attractive image-worship of their heathen neighbours. The way in which God chose to cure them was one which is said to be useful with children who are too fond of sweets, — the method of surfeit. He led them into a far country, and there they had their fill of idolatry. They saw the process by which gods were manufactured.[1] They observed all the abominations and the stupidities with which men adored the work of their own hands.[2] And they recoiled with a scornful contempt, which has endured even unto this day. Never again did the Jews long for deaf and dumb and impotent deities of wood or stone. The tradition of spiritual worship became ineradicable and supreme in the race. You may find Jews who are skeptics like Heine, pantheists like Spinoza, but you will find no more idolaters like Manasseh.

It was during the captivity also that the thought of

[1] Is. xliv. 9–20.

[2] The story of Bel and the Dragon, in the Apocrypha.

the excellency and glory of suffering dawned upon the Hebrew mind, and entered into their visions of the promised Messiah. It is true that there are other and earlier passages of Scripture which contain the intimations that the Christ must be acquainted with sorrow; but it is not until we come to the fifty-third chapter of the Book of Isaiah that we see Him set forth as the patient and silent sufferer, led as a lamb to the slaughter and dumb as a sheep before her shearers. The divine beauty of uncomplaining submission, the redemptive power of vicarious sacrifice, is a lesson which could be learned only in the depths of a grievous experience. It is the touch of anguish upon the human heart which makes it long for a Saviour who is familiar with pain, and able by the power of His sympathy to bring comfort and help. Nay, more than this, it is out of his own most poignant sufferings that a man comes to understand the possibility of suffering with and for others, and the figure of the Lamb of God bearing the sins of the world rises before his soul. And so we find, unless I am mistaken, something peculiarly tender and consoling mingling with the later pictures of the Messiah. He is the deliverer of the captive, the giver of sight to the blind. He binds up the broken-hearted and comforts all that mourn.[1] He comes as a meek and lowly King, riding upon an ass and upon a colt the foal of an ass.[2] His lineaments and his bearing are familiar to us, for they are those that we have known and loved in Jesus of Nazareth.

Another result of the captivity was an advance from

[1] Is. lxi. 1-3. [2] Zech. ix. 9.

the merely ceremonial and outward conception of religion to that which is moral and spiritual. Separated from the elaborate and engrossing ritual of the Temple, the Jews were thrown back upon the realities of religion as distinguished from its forms. They learned that the true worship is the offering of a pure heart, and the fast that God hath chosen is to deal bread to the hungry and give shelter to the outcast,[1] — the same lesson that was taught by the Christian Apostle when he said, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."[2]

But perhaps the greatest and most blessed effect of the captivity upon the true Israelites was the new conception which it gave them of the power and value of simple, earnest, personal prayer. The visible mercy-seat had been taken from them. The ark with its golden cherubim had been lost forever in the confusion of their national downfall. Nevermore should incense be offered before that mystic symbol of the Divine presence. But now it seems as if necessity were driving them home upon the great truth that the reality of that presence is not dependent upon any symbol, that God is everywhere, and that the aspiration of the human soul, rising in grateful adoration or earnest supplication, is the true token of the morning and evening sacrifice, the sweetest incense and the most acceptable offering. Prayer becomes the vital breath of religion, the native air which the captives carry with them even

[1] Is. lviii. 7. [2] James i. 27.

in their exile. The three children in the fiery furnace are saved by prayer. Daniel, the faithful worshipper, prays thrice a day in his chamber, with his window open towards Jerusalem. He prays in the lions' den and the mouths of the fierce beasts are stopped. Prayer is the believer's comfort and support, his weapon of defence, his light in darkness, his companionship in solitude, his fountain in the desert, his hope and his deliverance. And prayer is finally the means by which the captivity is turned again, and the exiles restored to their desired home.

This one hundred and seventh psalm was written, in all probability, just after the close of the captivity, when the Hebrews had come back to their dear country. And if we are seeking a name for it we can find none so appropriate as "The Praise of Prayer." For this is the theme with which it is concerned and the spirit with which it is filled. One after another the beautiful pictures of praying men and their great deliverances rise in the psalmist's verse. We see the Divine mercy flowing down to meet the human supplications; and the refrain which comes back again and again is this:

"Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble
"And he delivered them out of their distresses."

"Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness,
"And for his wonderful works to the children of men." [1]

The first three verses of the psalm refer especially to the restoration of the Jews from Babylon. If any one ought to have a deep and lively sense of the Divine

[1] Jer. xxxiii. 11.

goodness, it was the people whom Jehovah had "redeemed from the hand of the adversary, and gathered from the lands" of their dispersion.[1]

Then the psalm takes a wider sweep, and begins, in the fourth verse, to describe the power of prayer in the most varied scenes of human life, and the readiness of God to deliver those who call upon Him from every form of trouble.

First, we see a caravan of pilgrims wandering in the desert, losing their way, and almost perishing of hunger and thirst. They pray for guidance, and God brings them into the right road and leads them to a city of habitation. This reminds us of the story of Hagar and Ishmael,[2] and of the forty years' journeying of the Israelites in the wilderness.

Then, in the tenth verse, we see a group of prisoners in darkness and bondage. Their limbs are chained with iron, their hearts are fettered with affliction. They pray for liberty, and God breaks their bonds and brings them out of the prison-house. This reminds us of Israel in Egypt, of Jeremiah in his dungeon, of Daniel in the den of lions, of Peter in prison at Jerusalem, and Paul and Silas at Philippi.[3]

The seventeenth verse begins a new picture. And this time it is a company of foolish men, who are overtaken with disease in consequence of their transgression. They are filled with loathing and disgust for all manner of food; they turn away from the things which

[1] Is. xliii. 5, 6.

[2] Gen. xxi. 15–20.

[3] Ex. ii. 13; Jer. xxxviii. 6–13; Dan. vi. 16–23; Acts, xii. 1–12; xvi. 23–34.

once delighted them, and feel themselves swiftly approaching the door of death. Then they cry for mercy, and God hears them. Their life is spared, their health restored, and they are saved from their graves. This reminds us of the story of Naaman, and of Hezekiah, and of the lepers who were healed by Christ.[1]

In the twenty-third verse the psalmist turns to the ocean, and gives us that wonderful description of a storm which makes us see that at some time he must have gone through a like experience. We watch the ship hovering upon the lofty mountains of water and plunging headlong into the slippery gulfs. She seems first about to touch the stars, and then about to bury herself in the depths of darkness. Her sailors reel to and fro, their hearts seem to be dissolved in distress. They are at the end of all resources.[2] Then arises the familiar cry, "Lord save us, we perish." The storm sinks into a gentle air, the waves are still, and the ship glides quietly and joyfully into the desired haven. This reminds us of the disciples on the sea of Galilee, or of Paul tossed by the tempestuous winds upon the waters

[1] 2 Kings, v. 1–14; xx. 1–11; St. Matt. viii. 2, 3.

[2] "The swelling surges climb the sky;
"The shattered oars in splinters fly;
"The prow turns round, and to the tide
"Lays broad and bare the vessel's side;
"On comes a billow, mountain-steep,
"Bears down, and tumbles in a heap.
"These stagger on the billow's crest;
"Those to the yawning depth deprest
"See land appearing 'mid the waves,
"While surf with sand in turmoil raves."
Æneid, Book I., Conington's Translation.

of the Mediterranean, yet coming with all his company safe to land.[1]

In the thirty-third verse the structure of the psalm is altered. The prayers of men in distress give place to a description of the sovereign dealings of God in providence. We see Him transforming the face of the earth, changing the land of rivers into a wilderness and covering the fruitful region with barrenness, because of the wickedness of the inhabitants; and then we see Him restoring the fertility of the desolate country and causing His people to dwell there in peace and plenty. He sends a blessing of abundance upon them so that they multiply greatly; and again they are wasted and brought low through oppression, evil, and sorrow. Princes are cast down and driven forth into exile. Poor men are lifted up and their families increase like a prosperous flock. Before these works of Jehovah the righteous rejoice, but iniquity is struck dumb with astonishment.

"Who is wise that he should observe these things
"And that they should understand the loving-kindness of Jehovah." [2]

This, then, is the great lesson of experience, the fruit of wisdom, the result of a clear and careful observation of life, — to "understand the loving-kindness of the Lord."

First, to recognize that His loving-kindness is sovereign, that it is a royal attribute far above human control. He doeth His will among the hosts of heaven

[1] St. Mark iv. 35–41; Acts xxvii.

[2] I have followed here the translation of Perowne in preference to the Revised Version.

and among the inhabitants of earth. There is none among His creatures that can bind or compel him. The laws of nature are but the expression of His good pleasure, and the forces of society bend obediently to His purposes. The history of mankind is the unfolding of His great designs, and everything that happens is subject to His authority. This is the first element in a true understanding of His loving-kindness, and we cannot even begin to pray aright until we realize that God is supreme and omnipotent.

The second element in this understanding is the knowledge of His righteousness. He hath mercy for the penitent and judgment for the proud. He sends blessings to the lowly and punishments to the rebellious. He deals with men according to their characters, and orders the course of human affairs as a wise and holy God, with continual regard to the moral welfare of His creatures. It would be strange indeed if He answered the prayer of the wicked as readily as He hears the supplication of the good. And it would be still more strange if we could not see in the operations of His providence the proofs of His favour toward those who love and serve Him. It is true that in many of the workings of nature He scatters gifts with a lavish hand, and "maketh the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust."[1] But in the effect of these gifts upon those who receive them the operation of His moral law is manifest. Prosperity is the destruction of the wicked, and adversity is the salt of the righteous. Luxury eats out the

[1] St. Matt. v. 45.

life of the ungodly nation, and hardships strengthen the fibre and secure the permanence of the people that obey the Lord. In the hands of the unrighteous the fairest land becomes a desert; in the hands of the upright the desert buds and blossoms like the rose. It is to those who acknowledge His goodness and obey His law that the ear of the Lord is ever attentive.[1] It is the effectual prayer of the righteous man that availeth much.[2] If we want God to listen to us we must first submit our hearts to Him.

The third element in a true understanding of His loving-kindness is that He manifests it in answer to prayer. We must ask if we would receive, we must seek if we would find. We must knock if we desire to have the door of heaven opened to us.

Prayer is something that no man can understand; there is a mystery about it. We cannot explain how the voice of a mortal creature should have any influence upon the immortal God; how there should be any connection between the supplications which are wrung from our hearts by the pressure of want and danger and the fulfilment of those vast designs which have been formed from all eternity. But however that may be, prayer is an instinct of the human heart, and the religion which did not provide for it would be no religion at all.

Suppose for a moment that you were convinced that it was of no use for you to cry out to God in the hour of your distress. When great peril comes upon you and death is near, the plea for rescue is silenced upon your

[1] Ps. xxxiv. 15. [2] James v. 16.

lips. When sickness enters your household and one whom you love is slipping away from you, you are forbidden to tell God, forbidden to appeal to Him for mercy. What would your religion be worth to you? Would you not sell it all for just one chance to speak to your Heavenly Father and ask Him to help you?

Let us not be deceived into exchanging Christianity for a cold philosophy about God and destiny. Let no one persuade us that our religion can possibly survive without prayer. For the essence of the Bible is that there is a prayer-hearing and a prayer-answering God. His servants have ever turned to him in the day of their need, and He has wrought great deliverance for them. Not always in the way that they have expected, for that would be to make the Divine wisdom subject to human ignorance. But always in such a way as to give them the *substance* of His mercy, and to prove that an earnest, faithful prayer has never been offered without bringing down a blessing.

It is no valid objection to this to say that the Bible itself teaches that all things are foreordained in the wise counsel of God before they come to pass. For this only carries us back into the region of the infinite quantities, where all our logic is at fault. If the event is predetermined, so also may be the prayer. It may be the connecting link in the chain. And since we cannot tell beforehand what God will do, it would be just as foolish to say that He will send the deliverance whether we ask for it or not, as it would be to say that He will send the harvest without the seed, or the rain without the cloud.

Nor does the fact that he employs natural causes and agencies in the answers to prayer, destroy its reality or decrease its necessity. "Thus for instance we pray that the cholera or murrain may be stayed. God does not with His own hand take away the plague; but He puts it into the heart of some physician to find the remedy which will remove it. He does not hush the storm in a moment; but He gives the mariner courage and skill to steer before it till he reach the haven. He does not shower bread from heaven in a famine; but he teaches the statesman how, with wise forethought and patient endeavours, at least to mitigate the calamity. . . . And thus the answer comes, not by direct interference with the laws of nature, but in accordance with the laws of the spiritual world, by the Divine action on the heart of man."[1]

There is something in all this which we cannot comprehend or explain; and something, also, which it seems very simple to comprehend and explain by the mere processes of natural law. But neither the mystery nor the simplicity should shake our faith in the power of prayer. For though our theories may be at fault, doubtless our practice will be right, and our hearts will be at peace, if we follow the example of Jesus Christ and pray without ceasing.

[1] J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Feast of Harvest*, p. 19.

XV

THE NEW TEMPLE

Psalm CXVIII

THE NEW TEMPLE

When the Persian Cyrus had conquered the land of the Chaldeans and overthrown with one swift stroke the proud Babylonian empire, universal joy filled the hearts of the children of Israel. They recognized in this mighty monarch of the north, the anointed prince whom Jehovah had sent to avenge their shame and put an end to their bondage. And when the decree[1] was published which declared that the Hebrews were free to return to their own country, and pledged the assistance of the Persian empire to the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple, then were the exiles "as them that dream."[2] So wonderful was their deliverance that they could hardly believe that it was real. Then was their tongue filled with laughter and their mouth with singing. The fountains of sacred music which had been sealed so long, or had sent out only the plaintive, trickling songs of woe, were opened again, and many beautiful psalms gushed forth from the soul of the liberated people.

But we must not forget that there were elements of sadness mingled with their joy. They were emancipated from captivity, but they were not yet delivered

[1] 2 Chron. xxxvi. 22, 23. [2] Psalm cxxvi.

from trouble. They had permission to go back to the promised land, but the way thither was long and perilous, and the prospect of their arrival was full of hardship and danger. It may have been owing to these discouragements, as well as to the attachment which many of the Jews had formed to the country in which they had been living for two generations, that so small a proportion of the whole people availed themselves of the liberty which Cyrus had granted. The Book of Ezra gives us the exact number of the great caravan which set out, under the leadership of Prince Zerubbabel, to restore the glory of Zion and replant the waste places of Judah. They were forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty souls, beside their slaves, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven.[1] For this company, including doubtless the old and the young, women and children, there were eight thousand one hundred and thirty-six beasts of burden, horses and mules, camels and asses; and so, as the number of the people was six times that of the animals, we may be sure that for most of the pilgrims the journey home was a long walk. Four months it took them to cross the desert,[2] which was exposed then, as now, to the fierce raids of robber tribes, and almost entirely destitute of water and pasturage. It can hardly be that the courage of the returning exiles was not often sorely tried and their heart cast down within them. They were going home; but how desolate and forsaken would be the land after its years of desertion. They were carrying with them the golden vessels of the

[1] Ez. ii. 64–68. [2] Ez. vii. 8, 9.

Temple, which the generous Cyrus had restored to their possession ;[1] but they had no place to put these sacred relics, for the House which they once adorned had been overthrown and blotted out from the face of the earth. Of a truth, these pilgrims "went forth weeping, bearing precious seed."

And when at length they arrived, the aspect of their country must have been most disheartening. The city of their pride and love was dismantled, her walls broken, her palaces plundered and destroyed, her streets silent and ruinous. The smiling beauty and fertility of the land had vanished. It was cultivated only by the remnant of the people, and in many regions the scanty inhabitants, mixed with heathen vagrants, had sunken into a state of semi-barbarism. The ancient enemies of Israel, the Moabites on the east, the Philistines on the west, the fierce and treacherous sons of Edom on the south, had encroached upon the former possessions of the chosen people from every side, and on the north the mongrel Samaritans were established in the very centre of the fairest portion of the land. The presence of these confused and hostile neighbours must have been a continual menace to the security of life and property; and even within the narrow strip of territory which remained open for the occupation of the restored exiles, it must have been extremely difficult for them to settle themselves in anything like peace and comfort.

This was the first task which lay before them, and accordingly they scattered to their cities,[2] each family returning as far as possible to its native district, like a

[1] Ez. i. 7. [2] Neh. vii. 6.

salmon to its river, and busied themselves with setting up their new homes. But before seven months had passed, so deep and loyal was their devotion to the chief object of their return, and so ardent their desire for the restoration of Zion, we find all Israel gathered together, as one man, to Jerusalem.[1] First they restored the altar of Jehovah on the sacred spot where it had been built by David, five centuries before.[2] Then they renewed the sacrificial offerings and the observance of the feasts.[3] And then they began the collection of money and workmen and materials for the rebuilding of the Temple.[4] It is difficult for us to realize the depth of affection for the House of God which is expressed by such a resolve and such an effort, under the circumstances in which the Jews were placed. They were most of them poor, many of them, perhaps, still houseless. Even those who had brought wealth with them from Babylon must have had innumerable calls to use it in the general poverty, and many opportunities to invest it to the best advantage in schemes for the development of the country. But they recognized that religion had the first call, and that the erection of the House of God was the best investment. Other wants could go unsatisfied; other enterprises could wait; the first thing that they desired to do was to restore the Sanctuary.

One year after the erection of the altar, they were ready to lay the foundations of the new Temple.[5] There was a great assembly of the people; the priests

[1] Ez. iii. 1. [2] Ib. 3. [3] Ib. 4.
[4] Ib. 7. [5] Ib. 8–13.

were there in sacred robes, blowing their silver trumpets; the sons of Asaph, clashing their cymbals and singing their cheerful psalms. The heavy corner-stone was moved into its place amid the sound of music, and the shout of joy rang out to heaven when the people saw that the foundation of the House of the Lord was laid.

But how close together are the fountains of grief and gladness! How often the flood of tears mingles with the stream of rejoicing! The festival which is all brightness to the young, brings to the old, memories of loss and sadness. Christmas and Thanksgiving Day, with all their merriment and laughter, awaken echoes in the house, in the heart, which whisper "Nevermore;" and the joy of the present seems to fade and grow dull compared with the joy that has departed. The past wins

> "A glory from its being far,
> "And orbs into the perfect star
> "We saw not when we moved therein."[1]

It was so on that day of praise in Jerusalem. "For many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice."[2] Reverence their tears. It is true that this new house was destined to be twice as large as the old one. It is true also that for the city and the nation this was a day of triumph and hope. But for these survivors of a former generation there could never be any building that

[1] Tennyson, *In Memoriam*. [2] Ez. iii. 12.

would take the place of that lost Temple, which they saw transfigured in the misty memory of their early childhood, nor could they refrain from weeping when they thought that it was gone.

There are two ways of showing attachment to the past. One is by sneering at the present, finding fault with every new effort, holding back from every new enterprise, and making odious comparisons an excuse for inaction. There have always been some people of this kind in the world. If there were very many of them the world would probably cease to revolve. They are the old men of the sea, the heavy weights whom the workers have to carry along with them.

But the other way of honouring the past is kind and generous and beautiful. It pays grateful tribute to the beauty that has faded, and the glory that lives only in remembrance. It preserves the good things of former days from oblivion, and praises the excellent of earth by keeping their memory green. It is faithful and true, willing to learn, but not willing to forget. It drops a tear for the departed splendour of the first house, and at the same time it lends a hand in the building of the new house. Fortunate is the community, and complete the festival, in which this spirit prevails; for there the old and the young are in harmony, though not in unison, and the bright hopes of the future are mellowed and chastened by contact with the loyal memories of the past.

But the prospect of promise which is disclosed to us in these early months of the Restoration is soon overcast by the clouds of trouble. The Samaritans, jealous

and angry because their assistance in the rebuilding of the Temple had been refused by the wise Zerubbabel, began to harass the Jews and hinder them in their work.[1] False accusers were sent to the Persian court to represent the dangers that would follow the renewal of the former strength and beauty of Jerusalem. It was asserted that the pretended zeal of the Jews for their Temple was only a cover for rebellious designs. The Persian satraps were alarmed. Intrigues were set on foot and slanders were multiplied. The heathen tribes and the mixed inhabitants of Palestine "weakened the hands of the men of Judah and troubled them in building." An interdict came from the king, and for twelve years the work of restoration lingered, and confusion reigned in Jerusalem.[2]

Then a new monarch ascended the throne of Persia, the great Darius, a worthy successor of Cyrus. In the second year of his reign two new prophets appeared in Jerusalem: Haggai and Zechariah; and their mission was to rouse the people from the lethargy which had fallen upon them in the years of confusion, and summon them to the great work of rebuilding God's house. Their zeal had grown cold. Their offerings were withheld. They had come to think more of their own comfort and prosperity than of their religious obligations. Selfish cowardice, and avarice, and the love of luxury were relaxing the moral sinews of the people. They were covering their neglect under the hypocritical pretence of a strict regard for prophecy. The seventy years, according to their reckoning, were

[1] Ez. iv. 1–5. [2] Ez. iv. 17–24.

not yet past, and they said, "The time is not come that the Lord's house should be built."[1] It is easy to make the doctrine of predestination a cloak for apathy, and to find in scriptural figures an excuse for negligence. But the prophet struck through this vain pretext with a single blow. "Is this a time," cried he, "for you to dwell in ceiled houses while the Temple lies desolate? You are seeking your own gain, you are looking for much for yourselves; but it shall come to little. The heaven shall withhold its dew and the earth its fruit; your wages shall be put into a bag with holes; there shall be no blessing upon you until you bring wood and build the House that the Lord may take pleasure in it and be glorified." This is the voice of wisdom for every community of men. Public work must take precedence of private interests. Religious duty must override selfish considerations. The place of worship for the people must be built before the wealthy have a right to dwell in their comfortable houses.

The people of Jerusalem heard the warning and answered the summons.[2] Treasure began to flow in for the Temple. The work was taken up and pushed forward with new energy. Darius, on the appeal of the Jewish leaders, removed the injunction and favoured the undertaking.[3] He contributed from the royal revenues to support the builders, and made provision for the offering of the daily sacrifices. And thus, in the sixth year of his reign, the second Temple stood complete upon Mount Moriah.

[1] Hag. i. 2. [2] Hag. i. 12. [3] Ez. vi. 6–12.

It was greater in size than the Temple of Solomon, but less in splendour. The golden ornaments, the carven pillars, the embroidered hangings, were not so magnificent. The Holy of Holies no longer contained the Ark with its bending cherubim. The venerable tables of the law, the mystic rod of Aaron, the casket which held the manna, the jewelled breastplate of the High Priest with its Urim and Thummim, were lost never to be found again. But still the building was grand and sacred. It stood upon the very spot which had been consecrated by the sacrifice of Abraham. It was the Temple, the visible centre of their national life and worship, the House of God.

Its completion was celebrated with great solemnity. The priests and the Levites and the rest of the children of the captivity kept the dedication with joy. Hundreds of sacrifices were offered; and as a token that the divided children of Israel had at length been reunited by their common exile and their common restoration, twelve goats were presented as a sin-offering, one for each of the twelve tribes.[1] It was the festival of peace after conflict, of calm after storm, of favour after punishment. And as the multitude thronged to the portals of this new Temple, it may well have been the music of this one hundred and eighteenth Psalm that accompanied and welcomed them.

"O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good:
"For his mercy endureth forever."

Thus sang the people: and the priests replied: —

"Let Israel now say
"That his mercy endureth forever."

[1] Ez. vi. 16, 17.

And the people answered: —

"Let the house of Aaron now say
"That his mercy endureth forever."

And the priests replied: —

"Let them now that fear the Lord say
"That his mercy endureth forever."

Imagine the long procession chanting their praise to Jehovah, exulting because He had been on their side, and declaring their confidence in His alliance, magnifying His assistance above the deceitful help of princes, glorying in the dispersion of the enemies who had compassed them about like swarms of bees, and whose envious fury had been quenched as a fire of brambles, remembering with solemnity their sore chastenings, but rejoicing that they had not been given over unto death, — imagine this humble and triumphant train coming to the entrance of their Sanctuary, and crying, —

"Open to me the gates of righteousness;
"I will enter into them, I will give thanks unto the Lord."

And then hear the priests and Levites, singing as they throw wide the golden doors, —

"This is the gate of the Lord,
"The righteous shall enter into it."

"*Hosanna!* Save now!" rings again and again through the marble courts. Blessings flow and return, in joyous antiphon, from priests to people, and from people to priests. The sacrifices are bound to the great altar. The swelling tide of music lifts itself once more in a mighty billow of praise.

"O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good:
"For his mercy endureth forever."

There are many verses in this psalm on which we might profitably fix our attention for the lessons which they contain. But there is one which has a peculiar interest from its close connection with the life of Christ, and from the fact that He quoted it in application to Himself.

> "The stone which the builders rejected
> "Is become the head stone of the corner."

It may be that we have here an allusion to some well-known incident that had occurred in the progress of the building.[1] A fragment, perhaps, of the ancient Temple was rejected by the architects as unfit for a prominent position. But having been put in place by the advice of the priests, it was found to be the most appropriate and useful of all the pieces of the wall, — the head stone which bound together and solidified the whole structure. The people must have seen in this event a type of their own history, — their ruin, their rejection, the contempt with which the nations had regarded them, and the proud and firm position in which the Divine architect had now placed them.

But if this stone was a type of Israel, much more was it a type of Christ. For He was indeed "despised and rejected of men;" His own people would have none of Him; they cast Him out and scorned Him. But God, who builds in secret and according to His own eternal plan, had chosen Him for the corner-stone of the spiritual Temple; and upon Him the lives of the redeemed, whether Jew or Gentile, must all be built.

[1] Plumptre, *Biblical Studies*, p. 275.

"The Church's one foundation
"Is Jesus Christ the Lord."

He supports it, binds it together, adorns and unifies it. Other foundation can no man lay; and on this foundation if any man build he shall be saved.[1]

When our Lord repeated this ancient prophecy of Himself in the last week of His earthly life,[2] while the chief priests and Pharisees were gathering about Him to destroy His life, He was staying Himself with sublime confidence upon the Word of God. When again in the quiet of the upper chamber, before He went forth to His betrayal, He sang with His disciples this very psalm,[3] it must have been the strength and joy of His soul to remember that though the nation had refused Him, God would use Him and build upon Him the glorious fabric of the Heavenly Temple, of which the successive sanctuaries built upon the hill of Zion were but a frail and perishable type. They have crumbled into dust. Not one stone of them is left upon another. But the Church which was founded by the despised Jesus of Nazareth endures impregnable, and rises steadily towards the mystic beauty of its perfection. Stone after stone is added to it. Life after life is built into its holy walls. Let us bring our lives, our purest thoughts, our best desires, our noblest endeavours, all that we have and are, that God may place them in this eternal edifice. For be assured that no other structure shall continue. Every fabric of man's device, yea, even the scaffolding and supports

[1] 1 Cor. iii. 11, 12.
[2] St. Luke xx. 17.
[3] A part of the great Hallel.

which now surround the spiritual Temple, shall be swept away. Only the souls that have been truly built on Jesus Christ shall stand fast, and be filled with the presence of God forever.

XVI

THE CITY AND THE HOME

PSALMS CXXVII–CXXVIII

THE CITY AND THE HOME

THESE two psalms belong to that series of fifteen which are connected in our Psalter by the common title "A Song of Degrees." Various explanations have been given to this inscription, turning, for the most part, upon the different meanings which are assigned to the word "Degrees." I will not trouble the reader with these more or less learned speculations, but will simply say that the interpretation which is followed by the best modern scholars, refers the word to the successive stages of the pilgrimage which the Jews were accustomed to make thrice every year, to the Temple on Mount Zion. On such journeys it would be natural to beguile the tedium of the way, or to cheer the nightly encampment, by the singing of familiar ballads. The "singableness" of these fifteen psalms, "their freshness, their brilliant colour, their allusions, their reflection of the homely phrase and surrounding of the folk," [1] make them most fit for such a purpose. And we may feel quite sure that we have here a brief collection of the popular songs which were used in this way, — "Songs of the Upgoings," or,

[1] Murray, *Origin and Growth of the Psalms.*

as they have been called by one of our best expositors, "Pilgrim Psalms." [1]

Now it seems to me by no means an accident that the one hundred and twenty-seventh and the one hundred and twenty-eighth psalms were placed together in the Travellers' Hymn-book. For though they may have been written in different centuries, — the former, if we may trust the title and the indications of its style, being the work of Solomon, the latter coming to us from an unknown hand and a later age, — yet their subject and their spirit are the same, and they belong to all time and every condition of existence. They deal alike with the broad and simple theme of human happiness in the family and in the community. They present to us a clear and harmonious picture of the well-ordered life of man upon the earth, and they show that religion is the greatest of all blessings, for the present world, as well as for that which is to come. They are ancient and modern, human and divine. Ancient, because they seem to bring with them something of the calm and peaceful air of that lost Eden which was the first dwelling of our race, and those homely virtues which we connect with the simplicity of the golden age. Modern, because they recognize the social impulse which has been drawing and binding the households of men together in tribes and nations and great cities, teaching them to feel their mutual dependence and their common interest, and creating, in the slow but sure process of development, that vast complexity of advantages and perils which we call

[1] Rev. Samuel Cox, *The Pilgrim Psalms.* London, 1874.

Civilization. Human, because they spring directly out of the experiences of toil and rest and care and joy which are familiar to all the sons and daughters of Adam. Divine, because they lead us back to God as the source of all true felicity, and show us the streams of His goodness flowing down through all the fields of human life to make them fertile and beautiful.

It is no wonder that, among the many exquisite poems which were produced in Israel, some of which have doubtless been lost and forgotten in the lapse of centuries, these bright and simple lyrics were thought worthy of preservation and continual use; for the best poetry, the most enduring and the most popular, is that which appeals directly to plain humanity and weaves the threads of common experience into a garment of beauty for the daily life. It is no wonder that these psalms were chosen to have a place in the Psalter which the pilgrims used in their annual journeys to Jerusalem, for their thoughts must have often turned forward to the city to which they were travelling, and backward to the quiet homes which they had left for a season, remembering that the prosperity of both depended upon God. And it is no wonder that we find these well-worn songs included in the book which we call the Word of God, for in truth they contain something better than the finest poetry; they are full of the philosophy of life, the wisdom which cometh down from above; and if we read them aright we shall learn most important lessons from these Songs of the City and the Home.

Glance for a moment at their structure, and observe

the clearness and charm of their imagery. They are like paintings from the hand of one of the old masters, — like some of those delightful and priceless interiors in which old Pieter de Hooghe excelled all other artists: the simplest means are used to convey the impression: the view of a room in a peasant's house tells the whole story of patient labour and peaceful joy. But these poems have the advantage over any painting, in that they can pass at once from the particular to the general; they can show us at the same time the private dwelling and the multitude of clustering homes which are included within the city; they can move forward from the picture of simple faith and honest toil, to trace their beneficent results in the years to come.

First, we see the builder raising the walls of his house, and the watchman standing upon the city tower, keeping guard over the sleeping thousands, and we hear the declaration that building and watching are in vain without the favour of the Lord.

"An Gottes Segen ist Alles gelegen."

Then, we see the labourer going forth early to his work, and returning late to eat the bread which he has earned in the sweat of his brow; and we are reminded that the reward of all industry comes from God, and comes for the most part while man is helpless and unconscious. "He giveth to his beloved in sleep," — so runs the true translation of the second verse; and this tells us that the largest blessings are conferred upon us "without our restless self-activity, in a state of self-forgetfulness and quiet reliance upon the Divine goodness.

'God bestows his gifts during the night,' says the old German proverb."[1] Sleep itself is a great blessing; and while we sleep, the clouds are storing their supplies of moisture, the rivers are performing their ministry of labour on our behalf, the seeds are swelling in the earth, the grain is springing in the fields, the fruits are ripening on the tree, the harvest is growing golden in the mellow darkness of the autumn night; for in truth, if we are wise and diligent, Nature is on our side, and all God's world is busy preparing our bread.

From this thought the psalmist passes to that which was considered by the Hebrews the best of all earthly gifts, and shows us the picture of a father with his loyal and stalwart sons about him. "Children of the youth," he calls them: meaning thereby to give a strong and sensible commendation to early marriage, and to teach that it is a great privilege for a man to have his children grow up and come to maturity in his own house, under his own guidance; for thus he can have the joy of seeing them established in life before he leaves it, and their strength will be a support and stay to him in his declining years. They will be like arrows in his hand, whose course he can direct so that they shall hit the mark. They will be an honour and a protection to him; and he shall not be ashamed when he stands, with his sons by his side, among the throngs of men in the gates of the city.

The transition is easy from this scene to the bright picture of domestic felicity in the next psalm. It is only the continuation of the same story, for it may

[1] Delitzsch on the Psalms, vol. iii. p. 293.

well be one of those manly sons of whom we have just been speaking, the descendant of an honourable house, the pride and ornament of his father's old age, who is described as "the man that feareth the Lord and walketh in his ways." His uprightness and his industry are well rewarded. He becomes the founder and supporter, the house-band, as the good Anglo-Saxon word signifies, of a new family. His best success, his highest dignity, his richest treasures, are at home. His wife, full of the grace and delight of womanhood, is "like a fruitful vine in the inner part of his house." For this is the meaning of the phrase which is translated "by the sides of thine house."[1] It refers not to the exterior, but to the interior, walls, and it teaches that woman is formed not for public display, but to adorn and sweeten the private life. She is not fitted for the rude conflicts of the market-place and the forum. Her sphere is in the home.[2] And she best fulfils her mission when she makes that home lovely and pleasant to those who dwell in it, even as the luxuriant vine, spreading itself upon its supports, clothes them with beauty, and diffuses a grateful shade, a fragrant odour, through the courts of the house. In such a home, the children, well-nurtured in body and in soul, spring up like vigorous young olive-plants, strong and straight and healthy, needing to be pruned now and then like all growing things, but sound at heart and full of promise for the future.

"After this fashion," says the psalmist, "shall the man be blessed that feareth the Lord." And surely

[1] The same word is used in Amos vi. 10. [2] Prov. xxxi. 10–31.

the world has no better fashion of blessing, though the newspapers be ignorant of it and the tongue of fame acknowledge it not. For in such a home, in such a wife, in such children, a man may take the best comfort to be found this side of heaven; and in the prevalence of such a manner of life, and the cultivation of such domestic virtues, lies his best and only hope of seeing the prosperity of the city in which he dwells, whether it be named Jerusalem or New York.

These are old-fashioned teachings, and they run counter to many of the accepted theories and fashionable customs of the day. Men draw a broad line between the sacred and the secular, and practically exclude religion from the political and social life. But the Bible tells us that the sacred and the secular are interwoven, and not to be separated. Men draw a broad line between the public and the private, and think that the evils of society can be cured without paying any attention to the virtues of the household, or that the purity of family life can be maintained without regard to the atmosphere of society. But the Bible teaches us that the public and the private depend upon each other, and that the welfare of the city and the welfare of the home are bound up together. There is a widespread revolt against the ancient doctrine of the dependence of woman, and an attempt to create a new sphere for her activities, where she may become the rival of man. A new standard of behaviour is set up for her, and she, or at least a certain portion of her, claims admiration for those qualities of boldness, and dash, and general mannishness which were once

considered the greatest faults of which she could be guilty. But the Bible still declares that modesty is her most graceful apparel, and a quiet and home-keeping spirit her highest excellence.[1] She will gain nothing, and lose much, by joining the Order of Gadabouts and Busybodies. In her children, given to her by God to be reared for His service, and for noble, useful lives in the world, she is to find her pleasure and her pride. When she shrinks from that gift as an incumbrance, fearing that to have children will hinder her in the pursuit of amusement, or interfere with her in that toilsome round of most unsocial observances which are sometimes called social duties, she is falling far below the dignity of her womanhood; she is, in fact, although unconsciously, letting herself down to the level of those whom the Romans, with sublime sarcasm, called *mulieres extraneæ* — external women, — because their lives were outside, excluded by their own choice from that interior circle of the home, in which alone the true woman's nature puts forth its sweetest blossoms and bears its best fruits. But when she welcomes her children as blessings, and is proud of them, as the Roman matron Cornelia was of her two boys; when she gives to them and not to strangers the best that she has to give, and seeks to pour her very life, with all its noblest convictions, and hopes, and purposes, into theirs; then she is manifesting not her weakness but her strength, and exercising the largest possible influence upon the welfare of the nation and the race.

[1] If the advice of St. Paul and St. Peter be not yet out of date, it may be found in 1 Tim. ii. 9 and 1 Pet. iii. 3.

We must not suppose that these teachings, and others of like nature which we find throughout the Bible, are mere matters of taste and sentiment. They are not addressed alone or chiefly to the emotions. They appeal to the reason. They are confirmed by history. They are, in fact, the statements of the underlying principles of human society. Where they have been accepted and put into practice, society has prospered, peace and order have prevailed, noble types of humanity have been produced. Where they have been denied or neglected, confusion and misery and degradation have followed. Let us take three lessons which are contained in these psalms, and apply them in a practical way to our modern life.

1. Civic prosperity depends upon the favour of God and the active influences of religion.

The striking feature of modern history is the rapid growth of great cities. Every city needs to be watched, for it is just as truly a centre of danger as it is a centre of civilization. In olden times the city watchmen kept their faces turned outward, looking for a foreign enemy. In these times they need to keep their faces turned inward, watching the signs of municipal corruption.

The city gets the best and the worst of mankind. Extremes touch. Vices knot and generate in clusters like snakes. The demos creates demagogues, and demagogues are worse than epidemics. Large opportunities make big thieves. The blind power of the ignorant, and the unwatchful indifference of the prosperous, often put base and godless men in office, who

feed like leeches upon the blood of the community, and drop off only when they are gorged.

In the confusion of the city selfish greed finds the best shelter for its cruelties, and envious idleness prepares the social dynamite with which it would willingly blow up the world for the sake of looting among the ruins. We who live in the city are dwelling on the edge of the volcano. There are forces of evil beneath us strong enough to shatter our civilization into fragments. But, at the same time, there are other forces which restrain and prevent the calamity. And I do not hesitate to affirm that the strongest of these is the grace of God and the power of religion. The grace of God, — that secret influence of the Spirit of all good upon the hearts of men, which enables them to check their selfish passions, and draws them, even in spite of themselves, towards higher ideals: the power of religion, — that deep sense of responsibility to a Mightier and a Holier Being, and the apprehension of His judgment in another world; these are the influences which are chiefly operative in the preservation of civil order. They give dignity to law, and sanctity to government, and value to human life. If they were taken away, chaos would come.

The fear of God is the bulwark of society. Every institution which enforces it upon the human heart and conscience is of incalculable worth to the community. If the Roman Catholic Church were abolished to-day, and the faith of all its adherents destroyed, the government of this city would become an impossible task. We Protestants may not agree with the priests in their

doctrines, but when it comes to practice, they are worth more than an army of policemen. After all, the religious people, those who recognize God and His law, rule the city; and they have a right to rule it. For through them God exercises His protecting power, and keeps the city from destruction.

2. The only secure basis of the home and the domestic virtues is religion.

All the forces which threaten the permanence and purity of family life are distinctly irreligious. Divorce, the social evil, the vicious luxuries of the rich, the brutal vices of the poor, the indifference of parents towards their offspring, the insubordination of children towards their parents, are condemned by the Word of God. And, on the other hand, the Bible puts a Divine sanction upon the home, and promises a Divine blessing to those who are faithful in its various relations. It teaches masters to be kind and servants to be diligent, parents to be forbearing and children to be obedient, husbands to be affectionate and wives to be loyal. It lifts the life of the household up to a higher plane when it reveals God as the Father "of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named," and declares that marriage is a worthy symbol of the union of Christ and His Church.

These sanctions and precepts are greatly needed, to preserve the home from extinction in the fierce pressure of our modern city life. What can parents expect who neglect and despise them, who make no acknowledgment of God in their domestic life, and never ask His blessing upon their tables and upon their fami-

lies? And what is to become of the generation of children from whose secular education religion is banished by order of the state, and from whose home training the Bible is left out by negligence of their parents?

Surely it would be a good thing, if, in our schools, it could be recognized that a child had far better grow up thinking that the earth is flat, than to remain ignorant of God and moral law and filial duty. And it would be a still better thing, if, in all our homes, there could be a sincere revival of household piety, — piety in the old Roman sense, which means the affectionate reverence of children for parents, — piety in the new Christian sense, which means the consecration of the heart to God, — for this would rekindle the flame of devotion upon many a neglected altar, and shed a mild and gracious light through many a gloomy home, making it the brightest, cheerfulest, holiest place on earth.[1]

3. The welfare of the city and the welfare of the home are inseparably connected.

What is the city, after all, but a great collection of homes? And how can its peace and its prosperity be secured otherwise than through the order and happiness of those who are bound together in its scattered households? We often talk vaguely about the city as if it were a mighty entity, with a distinct life of its own. But in truth it has no existence apart from the families which compose it. Its life is theirs. The com-

[1] "Before the fall, Paradise was man's home: since the fall, home has been his Paradise." — A. W. and J. C. Hare, *Guesses at Truth.*

monwealth is made up of the multitude of individual weals. If these are destroyed, or changed into miseries, then the common weal becomes the common woe. The physical conditions, such as overcrowding, and bad buildings, and high rents, which make the formation of a home difficult, and the moral conditions, such as the prevalence of drunkenness and licentiousness, the inordinate pursuit of amusements, and the insane desire of wealth, which make the happiness of a home impossible, are the real dangers of the city. It is against these things that we need to be on our guard, and to work and fight with all our might. All legislation against these evils, sanitary laws, high-license bills, ordinances for the suppression of crime, are good as far as they go. But, after all, the great work must be done in and through the home; and this cannot be accomplished by the law; it can only be brought about by the Gospel. Men and women must make their own households sweet and orderly and happy; they must train their children in the fear of God and the love of man; they must promote the general good by doing their duty in the sphere of life and in the natural relations in which Providence has placed them.

The best way to show public spirit is by cultivating the private virtues. The first thing that you can do for your city is, to make a pure and sunny and healthful home in it; and the second thing is like unto the first, to help and encourage others to do the same. If you will honestly try to do this, you will find that you need, and you certainly will receive, the blessing of the Lord out of Zion.

XVII

BROTHERLY LOVE

Psalm CXXXIII

BROTHERLY LOVE

A GERMAN writer has compared this little psalm to a lovely rose, which charms the eye with its beauty and diffuses fragrance on every passing breeze.[1] And truly, though small, it is very sweet, like one of those old-fashioned flowers which used to bloom in our grandmothers' gardens, and whose perfume was at once richer and more delicate than that of the overgrown and flamboyant products of modern horticulture.

The title tells us that the psalm belongs to David. This may mean simply that it breathes his spirit, or that it is an appropriate description of his beautiful friendship with Jonathan, and that so the compiler of the Pilgrim Psalter was led by the tone and temper of the poem to connect it with David's memory. Or it may mean that he was the writer of it, and that it has reference to some actual experience in his life. If so, the event with which it falls in most naturally is the scene of his coronation at Hebron. A period of confusion and civil war among the tribes of Israel had followed the death of Saul. The nation had been divided against itself, the hands of brethren had been filled

[1] Herder.

with hostile weapons, and their hearts inflamed with bitter passions. It seemed as if the chosen people were to be split, and scattered, and thus exposed defenceless to the animosities of their heathen neighbours. Then came a great impulse of national love and unity, drawing all hearts together to the new King whom God had anointed. From the north, and from the south, and from the country beyond Jordan, the tribes came flocking to the town where he held his court. "All these men of war that could keep rank came with a perfect heart to Hebron to make David king over all Israel: and all the rest of Israel were of one heart to make David king. And there they were with David three days eating and drinking, for their brethren had prepared for them. Moreover, they that were nigh them, even unto Issachar and Zebulun and Naphtali, brought bread on asses and on camels and on mules and on oxen, and meat, meal, cakes of figs and bunches of raisins, and wine and oil, and oxen and sheep abundantly, for there was joy in Israel."[1] It is a bright and gladsome picture of the rejoicing of a reunited nation, and the secret of its beauty is to be found in the statement that all the people were of one heart.

After the death of Solomon this feeling of unity was lost and destroyed in the fierce enmity between the northern and the southern tribes. Separate kingdoms were established, and the descendants of Jacob, fighting under the rival banners of Israel and Judah, drenched the land of their common inheritance with

[1] 1 Chron. xii. 38–40.

fraternal blood. There was a long reign of discord and strife, such as might have followed in our own country if the attempt to divide the United States had been successful, and two jealous nations had been set up side by side among the people whom God intended to be one. It was not until both Judah and Israel had fallen before a foreign foe, it was not until they had been brought together in the sorrowful experiences of captivity and exile, and restored by a common deliverance to their promised land, that the ancient spirit of concord revived. Then we see the old hostilities forgotten in the joy of a new hope for Israel, and the jealousies of the past laid aside in the glad work of rebuilding the city of God. "The people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem." [1] "All the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water-gate, and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel." [2]

At such a time as this, it would have been natural to take up once more the ancient song of David, and to proclaim with the voice of music, that truth which had been obscured during so many centuries of civil strife and bloodshed: —

> "Behold how good and how pleasant it is
> "For brethren to dwell together in unity."

And this olden song, becoming popular again, would very likely be adopted and used by the pilgrims who came together from all parts of the land to the Feasts.

[1] Ez. iii. 1. [2] Neh. viii. 1.

Something like this may have been the actual history of our psalm; *may have been*, I say, for we must be careful not to insist upon any conjectural interpretation as if it were the only one possible. In fact, the psalm has a universal quality about it. It might have been written yesterday. The picture which it presents has a perpetual charm, and it finds its illustrations in every community, in every church, in every household, where amity and mutual helpfulness prevail. Age cannot wither, nor custom stale, the beauty of brotherly love.

The figures of speech under which the psalmist describes his theme are extremely simple and yet exquisite in their suggestive delicacy. He turns first to the ritual of religion, and choosing the most fragrant thing that was used in the divine service,[1] he compares the spirit of harmony and peace to the precious oil with which the High Priest was anointed. Our attention is not directed to the value of the oil, nor to its sweet perfume; though these thoughts are doubtless included in the figure and carried along with it. But the psalmist is thinking especially of the fact that the oil was fluent; so that when it was poured out, it ran down upon Aaron's long beard, and thus descended to the border of his garment. It diffused itself over his entire person.

And so the spirit of amity is not confined to any one part of the community, but it pervades and blesses the whole people. It may be that it begins at the head. God sends it first upon the rulers and governors, so that their jealousies and envyings are laid aside, and they

[1] Ex. xxx. 22–26.

are united in wise and generous counsels for the common weal. Certainly, without this unity in high places, there is little hope of general concord. When the leaders of men are filled with hostility and malice against each other, when politics degenerate into a prolonged strife between jealous statesmen or placemen, the nation has no pleasant prospect before it. It was so in our own country before the war. It is so in England to-day. The personal quarrels and rivalries of the House of Commons threaten to divide the British Empire into hostile camps. But when those who have authority and influence, those who occupy the loftiest positions in the state, agree in their broad principles, though they may differ in questions of detail, and work together in friendly emulation for the welfare of the entire people, then the influences of harmony flow out from them upon every part of the body politic.

It may be stated as a general law that, after a time of conflict and confusion, the spirit of concord begins to manifest itself in those who are elevated, by nature or by education, above the mass of the people. On the lower planes of life, among those who are ignorant and degraded, prejudices and animosities, once aroused, linger longest and are most obstinate. It is certainly so in our own country to-day. You may possibly find a few men among the swamps of Mississippi or the mountains of North Carolina who do not believe that the war is ended, — a few among the hills of New Hampshire or the backwoods of Maine who would like to "hang all the rebels." But that is only because they are so far away from the head that the oil has not

yet reached them. The unreconstructed and the unreconciled people belong to the soles of the feet. Those who are raised high enough to be able to look over the stone walls, those who are intelligent enough to take a broader view of things than that which is bounded by the lines of any one state or section, understand that the unity of the nation is of the first importance, and are prepared to make those sacrifices and concessions, within the bounds of loyalty, which are necessary for its maintenance, and to cherish that temper of fraternal affection which alone can fill the form of national existence with the warm blood of life. The first man, after the civil war, to recognize this great principle and to act upon it was the head of the nation, — that large and generous soul whose worth was not fully felt until he was taken from his people by the stroke of the assassin, in the very hour when his presence was most needed for the completion of the work of reunion. But the chrism of charity which had been poured upon him descended upon others in their degree, first upon those who were highest and best, then upon those who had to wait longer because they were lower. In proportion as men and women were thoughtful and intelligent, they felt the impulses of forgiveness and concord. When an important election was contested and the demagogues on both sides began to threaten war, the thinking people held together in the spirit of brotherhood, and the idle words of the braggarts passed away with the wind. When the balance of power was transferred from one party to another, there was no disturbance, not even a moment's check to the national

prosperity, because the thinking people, north, south, east, and west, felt that the nation was one and superior to any party. And now, any proposal or threat of separation would be laughed at, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Great Lakes. There is considerable talk just now, in this connection, about the New South, as if this were a great discovery which some one had made, or a new region which some fluent orator had created, and as if this discovery or creation would account for the present condition of affairs. But in fact it is just the old South and the old North, anointed with the oil of brotherly love which has flowed down from the head even to the fringe of the garments.

We may observe the operation of the same law in the family. Love descends. It has been said that parents love their children more than children love their parents. Whether this be true or not, it is certainly true that unless the father and mother love each other, there is small hope of affection among the brothers and sisters. Kindness is contagious. The spirit of harmony trickles down by a thousand secret channels into the inmost recesses of the household life. One truly affectionate soul in a family will exert a sweetening and harmonizing influence upon all its members. It is hard to be angry in the presence of imperturbable good-nature. It is wellnigh impossible to be morose in face of a cheerful and generous helpfulness. Beginning with the highest, the ointment drops even upon those who are unconscious or careless of it, and the whole house is presently filled with its fragrance.

It is just the same in the church. Here, also, the

spirit of peace and fraternity flows downward. It was poured out first upon Christ, the High Priest and Head. From Him it descends to those who are nearest to Him, and so extends its influence to all the members. It is an ill day for the church when her ministers and office-bearers are proud and heady and self-seeking, envious of each other, or wrapt up in their own dignity, caring only for their own interests, and strenuous rather to have their own wishes consulted and their own preferences carried out, than to consult the wishes of others and do that which is for the welfare and convenience of all the people. Their spirit will propagate itself, and the church will be divided and miserable. But when they are drawn together in love and concord, when their only emulation is to see which of them can make the largest sacrifices and render the most unselfish services for Christ, when they cultivate in large measure the fraternal temper, and prove that they regard all who love the Lord Jesus as their brethren, then the same temper will permeate all the members of the body, and the whole church will be bound together in the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace.

Church quarrels are proverbially the most bitter in the world. For two reasons. First, because they are usually about the most trivial causes. Second, because in the very act of beginning them men separate themselves from Christ, and thus give themselves over, at least for the time, to the devil. Every Christian is bound to give up something, much, anything that is not essential to his religious life, for the sake of his

fellow-Christians. Our great aim should be, not to secure the triumph of our private opinions or the gratification of our personal desires in the arrangement of church government and worship, but to do that which is for the greatest good of the greatest number. For the chief end to be sought is the prosperity and peace and happiness of the church; and this can only be attained when all agree to walk together in the way that is best suited to the majority, provided it is not contrary to the revealed law of Christ. And even in the interpretation of that law, we must be careful to read it in the spirit of humility and liberality, looking not every man on his own things, but every man on the things of others.

Peace is the most desirable of all blessings; and where all are of this opinion it is not hard to preserve it; for if a warlike soul intrudes, who feels that he cannot live without a quarrel, it is easy for the peaceful church to bid him farewell and godspeed. And if each member is willing and anxious to give up to his brethren, and more desirous of serving them than of pleasing himself, the oil of concord will fill the whole temple with its odours, and the very bells upon the skirt of the high-priest's robe will be anointed.

From the sanctuary and the ritual of worship, which belong in a certain sense to the world of art, the psalmist turns now to the world of nature to find another, and no less beautiful, symbol of brotherly love. He says it is

> "Like the dew of Hermon,
> "That cometh down upon the mountains of Zion:

"For there the Lord commanded the blessing,
"Even life for evermore."

And here, also, we must be careful and exact, to find the exquisite meaning of the simile. It is not because the dew falls silently and softly, nor because it makes the pastures green and fertile, but because the two mountains share in the same blessing, because it is diffused and imparted from one to the other, that the dew is chosen as the natural type of brotherly love. The lordly northern peak, with its crown of everlasting snow, and the lowlier southern hill, with its crown of towers, rejoice together in their nightly refreshment. There is even a more intimate connection between the two mountains than appears in our common English translation of the psalm. For the poet does not speak, as the Authorized Version makes him do, of the dew of Hermon and then of the dew of Zion. He says that the dew of Hermon, that same moisture which rises from its wooded slopes and deep, snow-filled ravines under the warmth of the summer sun, is carried down and diffused upon the hills of Zion. This is no fancy but a fact. "For an abundant dew, when warm days have preceded, might very well be diverted to Jerusalem by the operation of the cold current of air sweeping down from the north over Hermon." [1] Thus the higher becomes a source of blessing to the lower, and all the land rejoices under the influence of the same celestial favour.

After the same fashion do the benefits of the fraternal spirit diffuse themselves, and silently make their

[1] Delitzsch on the Psalms, vol. iii. p. 319.

presence felt. In the community where that spirit prevails, all good things flourish and increase. The ruler finds his task less difficult, the teacher is encouraged by the reverence and docility of his pupils, the benefactions of the rich are received with gratitude, and the labours of the poor are protected by justice and rewarded with liberality. The cottage, no less than the palace, enjoys the blessings of civil concord and social harmony. Human life, in every sphere, becomes easier and happier and more fruitful, as men recognize the ties which bind them to each other, and learn to dwell together in mutual affection and helpfulness.

The hard, cruel, bitter spirit of selfishness — every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost — makes the world like a barren and wearisome desert. The struggle for existence! — if that be all, — if every man's hand be against me, and, in order to succeed, my hand must be against every man, then this business of living for seventy years becomes very dry and tedious. There is no bloom, no fragrance, no freshness about it. It is like trudging through a wilderness of rock and sand. But if I can feel sympathy, — feel it within and without, — then the dew falls and the desert begins to blossom. By sympathy I do not mean merely a fellowship in sorrow, but also, and no less truly, a fellowship in joy, — a feeling for which we ought to have an English word. To be glad when your brother men are prosperous and happy, to rejoice in their success, to cheer for their victories; to be compassionate and pitiful when your brother men are distressed and miserable, to grieve over their failures, to help them

in their troubles, — this is the fraternal spirit which blesses him who exercises it, and those toward whom it is exercised.

The evil of socialism is that it exalts envy into one of the virtues. The folly of fashion is that it makes indifference synonymous with good manners, and crusts the heart with ice in order to give it a polish. The crime of worldliness is that it makes a man less manly and a woman less womanly. The glory of Christianity is that it opens the heart, and enlarges the affections, and teaches, nay, compels, men to love each other. "But, as touching brotherly love," says the great Apostle of the Gentiles, "ye need not that I write unto you; for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another." [1] This was a lesson that God would not trust to any other teacher than Himself, and so He came into the world and lived and died for us, to make sure that we should learn it.

There is a beautiful legend in the Itinerary of St. Anthony.[2] An old pilgrim narrates that, every morning at sunrise, a handful of dew floated down from Hermon and fell upon the Church of St. Mary, where it was immediately gathered by the Christian physicians, and was found a sovereign remedy for all diseases. What is this dew but the word of Jesus Christ? "This is my commandment, that ye love one another." It falls from heaven upon the church. But it is not meant for her refreshment alone. It is intended to be a cure for all the evils of society, spreading from heart to heart, from land to land, until the last desert vanishes and the lost Paradise is regained.

[1] 1 Thes. iv. 9. [2] Quoted by Perowne in his Commentary.

XVIII

THE BENEDICTION

PSALM CXXXIV

THE BENEDICTION

THERE is no word in human language more beautiful and attractive than that which this psalm carries in its bosom like a precious jewel, — the simple and familiar word of BLESSING. In the Hebrew it is *Barach*, which is connected, first, with the idea of worship, the bending of the knee and lifting of the heart to God, and then with the idea of the Divine response to this adoration, the heavenly favour coming down to rest upon the life of the worshipper. When an Israelite said, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," he called all his best thoughts and feelings to pour out their tribute of love and praise before Jehovah; and when he said to his brother, "The Lord bless thee," he meant to invoke all those good gifts which God bestows in answer to prayer, — the continual protection, the merciful regard, and the beneficent care of the great Father.

In the Latin and the Greek the words are *benedico* and *eu-logeo;* they both mean the same thing, — to speak well of any one; and thus a benediction from man to God carries with it the utterance of reverent thought and grateful feelings toward the Perfect Being; and a benediction from God to man is the reve-

lation of the Divine Love, the express declaration that the Creator intends and promises to do good to His creatures.

In our own tongue the word *to bless* is derived from the same root as *blithe* and *bliss*. It conveys the thought of peace and happiness. When we bless God we express the sincere desire that He, as the source of all light and life, as the maker and ruler of the Universe, may ever be filled with infinite calm and joy; that His glory may shine everywhere, and that all His works may praise Him in all places of His dominion. When God blesses us, He promises to satisfy our souls and make us happy.

Now this twofold significance of the word is very clearly brought out in our psalm. It is a greeting and a reply. In the first part the servants of Jehovah, who keep the night-watch in His Temple, are saluted, and exhorted to perform their work with gladness and gratitude, rendering blessings to Him whom they serve. In the second part they respond to the salutation by invoking their Lord's benediction upon those who have spoken to them so kindly and cheerfully through the darkness.

The custom of keeping guard in the Temple during the night is referred to in the Book of Chronicles (ch. ix. 33), and in the Targum we find a description of the way in which the duty was performed. "After midnight the chief of the doorkeepers took the keys of the Inner Temple, and went with some of the priests through the little wicket of the Fire Gate. In the interior court this patrol divided into two companies,

each carrying a burning torch; one company turned westward, the other eastward, and so they went around the court to see whether everything was ready for the services of the following morning. In the baker's chamber, where the *Mincha*, the offering of the High Priest, was prepared, they met with the cry 'All 's well!' Meanwhile the rest of the priests arose, bathed, and put on their garments. Then they went into the stone chamber (one half of which was the meeting-place of the Sanhedrim), and then, under the superintendence of the officer who gave the watchword, surrounded by the priests in their robes of office, their different duties for the coming day were assigned to them by lot." [1]

Some suppose that the first two verses of the psalm were addressed by those who came to relieve the guard to their comrades who were just going off duty, and that the third verse is their reply. Or we may imagine that the two salutations were exchanged when the separate companies, with their flaming brands, drew near to each other after completing their rounds. Other interpreters think it more probable that the first greeting was given by the congregation to those who were in charge of the night-service, and the second greeting was returned by the Priests and Levites to the people who were about to go down from the Temple hill. Still another view is adopted by one of our most suggestive English writers on the Psalms.[2] He supposes that a caravan of pilgrims are getting ready to set out

[1] Delitzsch.

[2] S. Cox, *The Pilgrim Psalms*. So also C. H. Spurgeon.

on their homeward journey. They rise long before daybreak, in order to be well on their way before the heat of noon overtakes them. Looking up through the darkness to the Temple, where they have renewed their vows and offered their annual sacrifices, they see the gleam of the torches moving about the courts, and hail the watchmen with words of cheer. Like an echo the blessing comes back to them, and they set out on their pilgrimage, followed by a hearty and musical "Godspeed!"

But whatever view we take of the origin of the psalm (and, indeed, it may easily have been used in any of these ways), its significance remains the same. We hear a double benediction, — man blessing God, and God blessing man.

1. Man blessing God.

We are not to suppose from this that the creature is necessary to the Creator, or that human worship can add anything to the eternal felicity of the Divine Being. And yet we are to suppose it, too; for, if the Bible teaches anything about God, it teaches that He desires the love and thankful adoration of everything that He has made, especially of man, whom He has made in His own image, and for His own fellowship. It is very easy to get lost in trying to enter into the mysteries of thought and feeling as they exist in the Supreme and Perfect Spirit. How can it be possible that One who has everything in Himself should want anything that we can give? How can we imagine that our actions and our words should make any difference to a Being in whom the tide of bliss is always at the

full? Can our indifference grieve Him in whose light there are no shadows? Can our affection be of any value to Him whom the hosts of Heaven surround with ceaseless praise?

But when we come to look more closely at the revelation which He has made of Himself through His Word, we learn that a man may rob God by withholding that which is His due,[1] that a man may grieve God by treating Him with ingratitude or irreverence,[2] that a man may please God by believing in Him and worshipping Him and walking in His ways.[3]

Now, if this seem strange and almost incredible to us, we may get some light upon it by considering that relation in which God has been pleased to make Himself known to us, and fixing our thoughts upon the great truth of His Fatherhood. A father is not in any sense dependent upon his children. All that they possess comes from him. His life is in every way larger and fuller than theirs. His being is complete in itself, and draws its sustenance, physical and spiritual, from sources over which they have no control, and of whose very existence they are ignorant. They cannot really give him anything, but only return what he has given to them. And yet how much he wants from them, and how truly they may become his blessings! He desires not only to see them happy, but to have them realize their happiness, and be grateful for it. That they should trust him and love him and obey him, that they should be responsive to the influence of

[1] Mal. iii. 8. [2] Ps. xcv. 10; Eph. iv. 30.
[3] Prov. xvi. 1; Heb. xi. 5.

his affection, and should show that they wish his welfare, — these are the things that he longs for; and when they are withheld from him, however rich and full his life in the great world may be, he is robbed and unsatisfied. A word of filial affection from them would be sweeter than the praises of the forum; a childish present from their hands would be worth more than the gains of the market-place. Lord Chesterfield was what the world calls a successful man, but the great sorrow and disappointment of his life was that his son was a dull and selfish and ungrateful clod. I was talking not long ago with a man of business whose career had been full of large financial triumphs, but the one fact on which he seemed to dwell with most satisfaction was that his daughter had often said to him, "You have been a good father to me." She had blessed him; and that was what he most desired.

Not otherwise is it with God. When He calls Himself our Father, He means not only that He is good to us, but also that He wishes and seeks our answering love. He would see His benevolence reflected in our gratitude, as the sunlight is given back from the surface of the lake. He would have our benediction. When we speak well of Him, when we acknowledge His goodness and express our desire for His glory, He is well pleased.

Have you ever noticed that the first half of the Lord's Prayer, beginning with the words "Our Father," is devoted to blessing God?

Hallowed be thy name: in this petition we pray that the number of those who know and worship Him

may be enlarged, and that their adoration may be more deep and fervent: that all false thoughts of Him may be removed, and all evil-speaking against Him may be silenced; that the light of His glory may shine everywhere, and the whole earth reëcho with His praise.

Thy kingdom come: in this petition we pray that His gracious sway may be extended over all hearts, and that every tribe and nation may submit to Him and serve Him as their Lord.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven: in this petition we pray that all opposition and rebellion against Him may cease; that every one of His eternal purposes may speedily pass into fulfilment; that every soul of His creation may come into harmony with Him, and the day arrive when within the infinite circle of His dominion there shall be no spot of discord to grieve, no shadow of sin to offend Him, but God shall be all in all.

Of course we know that His name will be hallowed, His kingdom shall come, His will must be done; for there is the force of omnipotence behind them, and nothing can finally withstand God. But at the same time we believe that Jesus Christ knew what was well-pleasing to his Father when He taught us, as the first duty of religion, to utter this threefold benediction upon Him who dwelleth in Heaven.

We bless God by believing in Him, by loving Him, by rejoicing in His sovereignty, by obeying His commandments. But the blessing is not complete while it is silent. The hands must be lifted up and the lips must bear their testimony.

A dumb love is acceptable only from the lower animals. God has given us speech that we should call upon His name. Worship is to religion what fragrance is to the flower. There are some men and women who go through the world without ever acknowledging Him who made them, or speaking a good word of God. To them the exhortation of this psalm comes home like a reproach. Why so sullen and speechless in His presence? Be not ashamed to bow your knees where men can see you. Be not ashamed to sing His praise where men can hear you. There is nothing that can become you so much as to speak well of your heavenly Father.

Let us remember also that this is one great object of the public services of religion, to unite the benedictions of the faithful in the house of the Lord. The Church is not only for the edification of man, but also for the glory of God. In our Protestant worship, we have come to think too much of what we get, and too little of what we give. Bring not empty hearts to be filled, but full hearts to be poured out in adoration. Stand not idle when the praise of God is sung, gazing curiously about the congregation, or listening critically to the choir. He is waiting to hear your voice; pour it gratefully into the tide of song. Let not your thought wander aimlessly all through creation, over your business affairs, or your plans of recreation, or your neighbour's dress, while the prayers are being offered; but send up sincere petitions from your own heart. Join earnestly and cheerfully in the worship. Bless God, for he is your Father.

2. It seems that the Temple watchmen in the psalm were not vexed or offended by this exhortation, but rather pleased and comforted. They took it in good part to be called servants and reminded of their duty. For they responded instantly with grateful speech:

> "The Lord bless thee out of Zion,
> "Even He that made heaven and earth."

Here we have the celestial side of benediction, — God blessing man.

The Divine favour has a twofold aspect. It comes, first, from God's natural bounty as the Creator of the world, and enters into our life in numberless forms of creature comfort. Food and raiment, health and happiness, are blessings from His hand. As we saw in the last two psalms, the prosperity of the city and the welfare of the home are gifts from Him.

It would be a thousand pities if, in our increasing knowledge of the processes of Nature and the means by which her results are produced, we should forget that behind all these there is the will of a generous Father providing good things for His children. He makes the sun shine, and the rain fall, and the harvests grow. If your tables are spread with bounty and your lives filled with pleasure, it is because He is kind to you.

But the other aspect of His favour is far more important. For after all there are wants within us which even God cannot satisfy with His outward gifts. He must do something more for us before we can be truly blest; He must give us Himself. And this is the blessing which He bestows "out of Zion."

Zion means the place where the Divine character

and will are clearly revealed. In Zion is God known; in other places he is only guessed at. The knowledge of God's holiness, His willingness to forgive sin, His compassionate purpose of redemption, was given to the Israelites through that religion which found its centre and home in the Temple. And therefore the hill on which that Temple stood was to them the symbol of Heaven. It seemed as if all streams of blessing flowed down to them from that sacred height. To Zion they turned their eyes when they prayed. Towards Zion they journeyed for their religious festivals. And out of Zion the pilgrims carried away with them the benediction which they had sought.

For us, Zion means the Church of Jesus Christ. It is there that we have learned to know and love God; it is there that we have heard the story of that Son in whom His pardoning mercy and saving grace have been revealed. The blessing that we receive there is better and more enduring than any other. It is, indeed, the only one that can content our souls.

Let us turn back for a moment to that figure of Fatherhood which we were considering, and look at it now from the other side. If the father has his desires towards his children, so also have the children their desires towards their father. It is not enough for them to dwell in his house, sheltered beneath his roof and fed at his table. They crave his affection; the words of his forgiveness when they have done wrong; the words of his approval when they have done right; the assurance of his fatherly love. And so our hearts naturally desire the assurance of the love of God. Where

else can we find it save in Jesus Christ? When He speaks to us, we know that our heavenly Father careth for us with a tenderness which He does not give to any but His children. When He dies for us, we know that God, who spared not His own Son, but freely delivered Him up for us all, shall also with Him freely give us all things. When He rises again for us, we know that death is conquered, and that there is a mansion for us in the Father's heavenly house.

Out of the Church these truths come to us, and they make our homes bright and peaceful, our trials light and bearable, our lives earnest and hopeful, and our long future full of light. The word of peace — if we have heard it at all — we have heard in Zion, and therefore we bless her name, and love her courts, and pray for her prosperity.

There seems to be a natural instinct which makes us desire that every religious service should end with a blessing. For nothing is more grateful and quieting to the heart than

> "the benediction
> "That follows after prayer."

After this old fashion would I close my book. The faces of my readers are unknown to me, even as the pilgrims who called through the darkness were unknown to the watchmen upon the Temple walls. But whoever you are, at least a benediction shall go after you. Your life is a pilgrimage. May mercy follow you out of Zion, and peace bring you to your home!

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